

Amitabha Apple Pie and Cubicle Chenrezig: Ethnography of an American Tibetan Buddhist *Sangha*

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation
with research distinction in Anthropology in the undergraduate
colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Kelly Schultz

The Ohio State University
December 2010

Project Advisor: Professor Jeffrey H. Cohen, Department of Anthropology

Project Co-Advisors: Professor Amy Shuman, Department of English;

Professor Hugh Urban, Department of Comparative Studies

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This case study of a Columbus, Ohio Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Center (KTC) examines the process and potential causes for adoption of Tibetan Buddhism by Americans of Judeo-Christian backgrounds. As a student of Anthropology, Folklore, and Religious Studies, I designed the project to be an opportunity to practice ethnographic fieldwork and as a supplement to my focus within these fields on Tibetan Buddhism.

Here, I describe the enculturation process and activities at KTC through my own experiences with the community and the information shared in ethnographic interviews and survey. Although it uses my voice and experiences, the research is not auto-ethnography; it is the story of my informants. While describing KTC, I explore themes of conversion, including the social, the physical place, relationships with the teacher, philosophy, psychology/therapy, self-transformation, and agency. I describe the nature of my relationship with KTC and its members and discuss issues that arose in the research process. I also examine KTC through the lens of the theories of Victor Turner and Michel Foucault and finally my reflections.

Considering the Abrahamic traditions in which the majority of KTC members were raised, Tibetan Buddhism offers a vastly different and even exotic tradition of spiritual development; upon first exploring KTC, I could not help but wonder, who are these American Tibetan Buddhists, and why are they here?

Chapter 2: About the Research

About KTC

West of downtown Columbus, Ohio, the Gyalwa Karmapa's Dream flag flies over a working-class neighborhood, symbolizing the meeting of heaven and earth, or the inseparability of spirituality and mundane life, and marking the location of Columbus Karma Thegsum Chöling (KTC). Columbus KTC is, as its name suggests, a "place of the Buddha's teachings of the Three Vehicles in the Karma Kagyu tradition," a Tibetan Buddhist practice and education Center. It is one of three-dozen Karma Kagyu Centers throughout North and South America established under the venerable Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, an aged Tibetan refugee who serves as head of Karma Triyana Dharmachakraⁱ monastery in Woodstock, New York. The Center is considered an official outpost of Karma Kagyu Buddhist tradition (Wesley, 1987); formal activities and teachings at KTC are those which have been created, passed down, or approved of by the Rinpoche and the leader of the Karma Kagyu lineage, the Gyalwa Karmapaⁱⁱ. The Center is the spiritual home to an estimated three to five hundred Buddhistsⁱⁱⁱ throughout Central Ohio, the vast majority of which are Caucasian-Americans of Judeo-Christian background.

KTC is a place of individual spiritual transformation and exploration, a place created by and for Americans seeking to learn and practice the Karma Kagyu tradition. This center does not serve any existing local community but creates one as practitioners visit from throughout central Ohio. It is run by an elected Board of Directors and maintained through events, sales, donations, and membership fees; it would seem to be completely autonomous to outsiders, if not for the great emphasis placed on ties to the Rinpoche and Karmapa. Sipping his beverage in a warm coffee shop, protection cords and deity necklaces hanging down over his "Fat Daddy Loves You" t-shirt, former KTC director Ed explained to me this complex relationship between the local population and the distant Tibetans:

Practically, yes, Americans own our Center. Ultimately, no. I suppose we own the mortgage...but I think we own a building (laughs). You know, the lineage is what controls the activity. And, you know, certainly we have a lot of latitude, because, you know, we're here, we do it. But it's His Holiness' Center. So to the extent that we're active, it's his activity.

The Center, then, has great value in both local and global dimensions, serving as a medium through which Americans can explore and study Tibetan Buddhism and as an outpost of a displaced religious tradition.

Founding KTC

Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, on the orders of H.H. Gyalwa Karmapa, arrived in New York in 1976 to found Dharma Centers and share the authentic lineage teachings. At this time, a small group of Central Ohio residents individually exploring a number of Eastern philosophies converged as followers of the Karma Kagyu tradition after exposure to the teachings of the Rinpoche and Karmapa. With the blessing of the two Gurus, the group united under the banner KTC, meeting and practicing in living rooms and basements. Although under the patronage of Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the group was astounded when, in 1980, His Holiness Karmapa flew from Nepal to visit the small *Sangha*. During the visit, forty Americans committed themselves to the Karma Kagyu tradition by taking the Refuge Vow. The Karmapa predicted the *Sangha* would become a significant one and advised his students to practice solidarity. As the *Sangha* moved through the eighties, it continued to develop, becoming what one early Board member describes as "less of a hippie Eastern scene" (Wesley, 1987). In 1990, KTC transformed the Rich Street Church of Christ, built in 1924, into the Meditation Center in which it currently resides.

The Thunderbolt Vehicle

The Buddhism practiced at KTC, Vajrayana (The Diamond or Thunderbolt Vehicle) or Tantrayana (tantric) Buddhism, is what is referred to as the “third turning of the *Dharmachakra*” (wheel of Dharma). According to this tradition, its practices and teachings encompass the two earlier schools of Buddhism, Hinayana (“the Lesser Vehicle”) and Mahayana (“the Greater Vehicle”) and utilize them alongside esoteric tantric practices as a quicker, more efficient means to Enlightenment. The path of the individual student’s spiritual transformation reflects the development of Buddhism throughout time and space; one begins with ritual-heavy, ultimately selfish practices (described as Hinayana^{iv}) which form the basis for more advanced practices. As one ascends spiritually, he may move forward to Mahayana, essentially self-less and compassionate, practices. In the upper levels of spiritual achievement, one may be taught the esoteric Vajrayana practices. Vajrayana, like other forms of Eastern tantra, places great emphasis on the importance of the student-Guru relationship; only through a personal relationship with a Guru of an unbroken spiritual lineage can one access the esoteric and powerful lessons of the Vajra vehicle. It is the task of the Guru to lead the student, knowing what he needs and when he is ready to move forward.

Despite the hierarchical nature of the three vehicles scheme, the result is ultimately an inclusive consideration of other Buddhist teachings, many of which are of vital importance in the definition of a Vajrayana praxis and belief. The doctrine of Expedient Means, which tells us that there are innumerable individualized paths to Enlightenment, promotes tolerance and inclusivism. Through the Mahayana concept Buddha Nature, one may come to see how everyone has the same inherent potential for good (or, more precisely, Enlightenment) and thus are deserving of compassion; through compassion, in following the Bodhisattva Ideal, one postpones his spiritual transcendence in order to help others with their own. The Vajrayana Buddhist seeks spiritual attainment primarily through transformed comprehension of the world around him and thus challenges the permanence and appearances of things, including the self.

While this philosophical and practical grounding in the first two turnings of the *Dharmachakra* ensure a Vajrayana that remains inherently Buddhist, in form and practice it is distinct from other forms of Buddhism. A greater emphasis is placed on the mystical and magic; as one ascends spiritually both natural and moral laws become less tightly binding. More common are practices which engage the senses and there are advanced practices which utilize the impure, the pleasurable, and the forbidden as means of transcendence. A pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas line ornamented shrines, serving in practices through which one visualizes and identifies with a higher form. The Guru, the holder of the authentic, esoteric teachings, is revered, a close relationship with him sought. Both the uniqueness of Vajrayana and its commonality with other forms of Buddhism have shaped the form of practice and teachings we find at KTC.

Methodology and Design

My primary reason for approaching the KTC *Sangha* was to develop an intimate and thorough understanding of a community created as a direct result of the “Dharma explosion,” the westward migration of the religious Tibetan diaspora. What were the effects of this culture contact and how did a tradition with a strict no-proselytizing doctrine come into the lives of these practicing American Buddhists? The original focus of my inquiry was the Tibetans themselves and the direct effects of their influence. To explore these issues, I began a preliminary inquiry by means of participant observation at the Center^v. Entering the community was an easy and enjoyable process; as part of an enculturation and outreach program, KTC offers weekly introductory classes on both praxis (primarily *shinay* meditation) and philosophy (*Dharma*). Scheduled socialization time between these classes served as an invaluable opportunity for observation and contact with *Sangha* members. I gradually broadened my experiences to other areas of both the formal and informal schedule of the *Sangha*, and by the time I had finished

the eight-week cycle of introductory classes and graduated to practice in the main shrine room, my focus had become the practitioners themselves. What light could their conversion and practice shed upon the facets of contemporary American religious life and on the purposes, functions, and value of religion in more general terms?

It was in the summer of 2008 that I first began visiting the Meditation Center on a semi-regular basis (generally one to six visits per month) and in the fall of 2010, I continue attending in a similar fashion. Participant observation has been the primary investigatory method for its value in allowing me to develop intimate knowledge of and a relationship with the *Sangha*, the Center, the praxis and philosophy. The extended nature of the research has allowed me to distinguish between more permanent behavioral trends versus temporary fads. In this way, I was able to accumulate an extensive working knowledge of the community that informed the research proposed to the IRB in July of 2009.

I entered the Center in an official research capacity in August, 2009 and my research continued until approximately June, 2010. During this period, I regularly attended and practiced participant observation at the majority of KTC activity scheduled (see appendix A). I was able to obtain *Karma Yoga* positions (through which one volunteers in service of the Center as a form of practice) for the majority of the busy fall schedule, including the visits of Bardor Tulku Rinpoche and Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the Heart Shrine Relic Tour, the annual KTC Fall Retreat, and the YWCA service projects. I experienced the Refuge Ceremony, Bodhisattva Vow, a number of Empowerments (Chenrezig, Green Tara, etc), the blessing of a Buddha Relic, and countless hours of meditation. By undertaking a schedule of practice, education, and volunteer work similar to those of the *Sangha* members, I developed both an empathetic understanding and a rapport with many of them.

While participant observation has served as an invaluable tool in the development of this ethnography and comprehension of the *Sangha*, supplementary data collection techniques were

required in order to address the research questions. In order to approach the questions in emic terms, I distributed a survey to all interested, adult KTC attendees (see appendix D) which dealt with questions of demographics, lifestyle, background, conversion, practice, and perceived cost/benefit relationships. The survey was designed as an opportunity for introspection for the members, which in the *Sangha's* philosophy could be perceived as an appealing opportunity for practice and contemplation. The design incorporated both opportunities for emic description (e.g. What about the Center attracted you initially? What about the Center has led you to stay?) and opportunities for interpretation. Twenty-five surveys were submitted. The survey questions also served as a basic outline for ethnographic interviews. Nine formal interviews were performed with ten interviewees, as well as several informal interviews with Lama Kathy, the Center's resident teacher. Interviews generally lasted from one to four hours and most often took the form of a personal religious history account.

I also used textual analysis; through the Center's teaching archives I examined approximately one hundred hours of sound recordings of teachings from the last decade. I considered these in terms of thematic patterns and frequency in order to illuminate possible influences of enculturation on the patterns of answers given by interviewees/the surveyed. Textual analysis also extended to *sadhana* texts as well as introductory materials, such as welcome and educational materials. A random section of one hundred consecutive "Topics" (groups of messages) on KTC's e-group, a moderately-used online forum, was also examined thematically and in terms of functionality.

The sensitive nature of the data, especially interview and survey responses, mandated anonymity. For this reason, names and identifying information have been changed; data and quotes remain acontextual in such cases when context risks identification both within and outside of the Center.

The Participants

Twenty-five surveys were submitted by KTC members, approximately ninety percent of whom attended the Center regularly (at least once a month). Of the twenty-five survey participants, eleven were female, fourteen male. Only one was under the age of twenty, seven between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five, eight between the ages of thirty-six and forty-five, three between the ages of forty-six and fifty-five, and six were over the age of fifty-six. The vast majority, twenty, held an advanced degree. Sixteen were single or divorced, while nine were married; eighteen had no children currently under their care. In self-description, three expressed intellectualism, six expressed an artistic bent, and eight expressed family problems and/or loneliness. Eleven came from Catholic backgrounds and seven from nonreligious backgrounds. Nine adopted Buddhism in the last four years, six in between four and ten years ago, and five between ten and fourteen years ago. Trends in the survey sample seem consistent with my observations of the KTC community at large, and I would argue that the sample is an adequate representation.

Invaluable as these surveys were in exposing trends, it was in the nine interviews (ten participants) that I was able to gather the richest data and obtained the fullest pictures. Whether in coffee shops, their homes, or places of work, the interview participants opened up to me to a greater degree than I had expected. Natalie, in her early thirties with long hair, flowing clothes, and quick wit, for whom Buddhism “is the middle way between that extreme, blind spiritual stuff and having an explanation for stuff that makes sense;” Greg and Parvati, the musician in his mid-thirties and the woman’s studies major, rarely seen apart, even in the interview process; Robin, the middle-aged woman whose personality still showed the influence of sixties counter-culture and her time in a Hindu ashram; Jean, the mother and social worker whom always seems to be trying to do something for someone; John, who, like the friendly uncle of the family is always good for a laugh or advice; Doug, a successful family and business man who describes himself as “horny for spirituality;” Kristin, who in her mid-

thirties is married to a Tibetan Lama; and Keith, a Mensan and artist in his forties, charismatic with a rich and dark past. Their insights have shaped this research as well as my own understanding of Tibetan Buddhism.

Chapter 3: Welcome to KTC

Before the First Visit

As with many who approach Buddhism and KTC, my own approach was somewhat indirect and based on tangential interest. As student of anthropology, I was intrigued by Tibetan culture as well as the study of religions, subjects which I explored through books and class projects. Many of my informants had similar experiences with Dharma books; approximately half of the survey participants indicated that reading books on Tibetan Buddhism ignited their interest in practice. Others approached it from physical disciplines (martial arts, yoga) and word of mouth. Greg and Parvati, mulling the interview questions while taking drags of hookah, described approaching KTC as part of a trend in philosophical discussion: “we were discussing a lot of way out there stuff at the time. I think that’s why both of us ended up there,” while Natalie described media influences such as the Beastie Boys, saying “we talk about planting the seeds of Dharma... and I think sometimes that comes down in very real ways.”

Only ten of the twenty-five survey participants actively sought out KTC^{vi}; nine were introduced by friends, the rest came across it by chance (such as introduction through ComFest or by driving by the Center). Of those who sought a place to study Buddhism, KTC’s website was a common draw. Survey and interview participants describe the site as alleviating nervousness and uncertainty about going to the Center through suggestions for first-time visitors and the image of Lama Kathy, which, as Arthur explained, gave him the impression that he would not be out of place. Timidity or uncertainty about how to approach this exotic place of spirituality is a common theme for newcomers, who most often come for the first time as pairs or groups.

Despite my academic and personal interests, I too who found KTC without seeking it. Every summer, the Center sets up a booth at Columbus’ Community Festival (Comfest) where they sell

decorations, items of practice, and t-shirts as well as distribute flyers describing the Center's introductory classes. When I came across it in the summer of 2007, KTC's booth was vibrant and eye-catching, even in a crowded and colorful event such as Comfest. What stood out most in my memory, however, are the personas of the people manning the booth, an impression echoed by Jean in our interview years later: "there was a girl there and she was just so calm... I just said to myself 'gee, I'd really like to be like her. So loving and so kind, it was just how I perceived her.'" The impact of the Comfest booth can be seen in the especially crowded introductory classes every July, in one of which I, too, had my first exposure to KTC.

The First Visit

It was a hot morning in July, and I was late. After (poorly) navigating the bus routes and then the neighborhood, I saw the unmistakable prayer flags and Tibetan sign, and continued up the walkway through the large crimson doors. The trepidation I was feeling was quickly alleviated as I was greeted by a smiling middle-aged man just inside the doors. "First time here?" The greeter asked. He was one of the many volunteers at KTC, and his position serves this exact purpose: to make guests welcome and comfortable. After asking me to remove my shoes, he led me up a set of stairs into a large shrine room; the room was vibrant, colorful, and heavily adorned (see chapter 6). The day's *shinay* meditation session had already begun and I was struck by the intense quiet and stillness possible in a room with several dozen people. Unable to discern if they acknowledged that I was there, I followed my guide to the foot of the shrine and, much to my surprise, we began to ascend. He knocked softly on a door to the right of the main shrine and opened it, signaling me inside.

Here, in a small library filled with about a dozen people, I apologized for being late and searched for a place to sit, resigning myself to a space on the floor until the man leading the class invited me to sit on an elevated cushion off to one side of the room. Several feet above the floor and my fellow students, I couldn't help but notice the image of a Tibetan man, whom I would later learn was the 16th Karmapa,

adorned in fine robes and sitting on a similar elevated cushion. I was in a seat reserved for the Rinpoches, Tulkus, and other high-ranking teachers. This was something which would continue to confuse me until much later, when accumulated knowledge about concepts such as Buddha Nature and the use of seats such as this to elevate the Dharma (specifically the lesson being taught) rather than the teacher would convince me that the seat had no inherent meaning to those at KTC.

The first lesson was in *shinay* (calm-abiding) mediation, a practice in which one uses posture, breath, and concentration to rest in a state of neither thought nor non-thought. Throughout the hour-long lesson we would meditate for approximately five minutes, sufficient time to convince me of both the calming benefits of the action and the sheer difficulty of it. Physical discomfort aside, the complexity of the practice comes from “watching the mind,” becoming aware of mental actions, and “gently letting go,” the act of ending mental actions of which we become aware. Much of the class, however, was given to describing the process, the benefits, and open forum discussion. Later, Lama Kathy, the Center’s resident Lama, would elegantly summarize our purpose:

We’re...practicing the muscles of letting go when we’re doing *shinay*. We’re letting go of all thoughts. We’re equal opportunity, we let go of every thought. And slowly, as we do this, we become good at letting go.

For most new Vajrayana Buddhists, this is the first and primary practice. Not only does it provide the practitioner with faith in the practice through potential gain of immediate benefit, but it works to dispel the Three Afflictions (attachment, aversion, and ignorance). Later, as I continued to study at KTC, the importance of releasing attachment, especially to constructs and false concepts, would become clearer.

At the end of the lesson, we were led out into the shrine room, where we stood in a line against the wall while listening to announcements. The awkwardness of this conspicuous position, I would later find, was not much alleviated by being on the other side, glancing at the newcomers by the wall. While

pleased to see new visitors, the constant in-and-out of introductory class students was straining on the social atmosphere and led to a more tightly-bound central circle. This became most clear during the tea breaks, during which members mingle in the downstairs basement-turned-family-room-type lounge, where there was an odd combination of warmth and exclusion. Some participants, especially the introductory class teachers, were exceptionally friendly to newcomers, engaging us in conversation and prompting us to ask questions. Within the group of new students, as well, friendly banter was common. On the edge of my awareness I knew that there was something bigger going on; there was something about being in the circle of couches, something appealing and yet somehow inapproachable despite changes in physical location or conversation engagements. This sentiment, I later learned, was shared by quite a few of the study participants. One of the younger women shared with me: “I went for a few weeks and I didn’t really feel like I made a connection to the place. Especially the people... I stopped coming to meditation because I didn’t want to come to the half an hour break in between... I think you have to knock really hard if you want in.” She would later return, moving into a comfortable place in the social circle by the time I met her (see chapter 5).

After spending a half-hour in the lounge, we returned upstairs, summoned by the sound of a gong. Next was an Introduction to Buddhism class, part of the eight-week non-consecutive course spanning topics from the life of the Buddha to history of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. The teachers, senior students (usually in both age and rank), volunteered for the position and followed a lesson plan outlined by the KTD Gurus and Lama Kathy. John described this teaching process as such: “I joke, but I’m kind of a well trained monkey or parrot; I can say the words, but they’re not my words.” However, there is considerable time for a question and answer forum, during which teachers may inject what they feel is most important for one first understanding Tibetan Buddhism. The result is a fairly individualized and revealing look into the spiritual personality of the teacher, from those who cling to the most minute of rules and beliefs, to others who admit that some of KTCs practices just seem “too weird” at first. The

relationship with one's first introductory teachers is a common theme I encountered when discussing the formal adoption of Buddhism with participants; one man, for example, steeped in the tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous, quickly asked one of the introductory teachers to be his "sponsor." Another survey participant wrote: "My first meditation teacher... was so funny, open and honest that I thought, 'Are there people who are really like this?' I was hooked."

Throughout my eight-week load of introductory classes, I did not venture far outside of the routine of my first visit. By spreading the course load over several months, I avoided taking the Refuge Ceremony, the formal adoption of the tradition, until much later in my time at KTC. Eventually, however, I began to take up my first seat in the shrine room; I did so hesitantly, for the act of sitting in the main shrine room for the first time seemed like a rite of passage that one must first earn.

Chapter 4: Activities

Growing up

The natural transition from the introductory classes was into the meditation period and “Dharma Talks,” which occur at the same time as the library classes. Meditation lasts for an hour, the beginning and end of which are marked with the chime of a Tibetan singing bowl. About half-way through the hour, the singing bowl sounds once again, summoning the mediators to slowly rise and perform walking meditation, during which the group circles the room three times in five minutes. This is the time, my helpful seniors pointed out, that it is easiest for one to escape the shrine room without notice. During my first session, as a point of pride (an emotion I would soon be asked to do without), I sat for the full hour, despite the difficulty of this task. It felt like a rite of passage, one on which I would receive compliments as well as compliment many newcomers in the future.

The next session, after the tea break, is reserved for teachings, called “Dharma Talks.” Depending on the teacher, these would usually start with recitation of the Four-Line Refuge Prayer in Tibetan (see appendix B) three times. During this hour, Lama Kathy or one of the senior students teaches for about forty minutes and then opens the floor to discussion. The senior students, lacking the training of a Lama, were most often lead a type of book-study, or book-summary, of a text approved by the KTD lamas. Approved texts included titles such as *Living in Compassion* by Bardor Tulku Rinpoche^{vii}, *The Great Path of Awakening* by Jamgon Kongtrul, *Dharma Paths* by Ven. Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, or classic texts such as *The Heart Sutra*. The sessions would end with a recitation of the Dedication of Merit, after which a moment of silence gave practitioners the opportunity to mentally pray^{viii} that the previous activities benefit all others, endlessly.

The next step in my progression was to take part in a chanting *sadhana* (chanted traditional practices). These are the most common events at KTC, occurring five times on an average week. The

shrine room is rearranged with two lines of knee-high tables facing each other in the front, center area of the shrine room, meditation cushions around them for seating. On these tables, long rectangular *sadhana* texts sit, wrapped in colorful cloth. The texts themselves are sheets of thick paper with Tibetan script, the anglicized Tibetan, and the English translation, as well as accompanying images of deities, mantras, or lotuses. At the time when I first began sitting in on these practices, there were no classes available in which one could learn the actions and meanings. These classes would be common later, upon the return of “*Lhamo*” (a Tibetan hypocorism given by Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche), a woman in her fifties who, due to health issues, had been forced to retire from the three-year retreat before she could become a full Lama. My lesson, however, was practical; watch and try to chant along. I was loaned a practice mala (loop of prayer, or counting, beads) from a shrine-side shelf, and then allowed to squeeze in as many questions as I possibly could before the beginning. Once everyone, usually two to a dozen people, had been seated, we would begin.

The chanting began with the sound of the singing bowl struck by the *umpsey*, chant leader, another one of KTC’s volunteers. The *umpsey* set the speed of the chant and led the group through the changing tunes and patterns of the practice. He was the first to begin the mudras, to ring the bells; he was the decider of how many fast-paced abbreviated mantras were enough when the text instructed one to repeat an undefined number. Mudras, as well as the sound of bells and drums, were offerings to the deity central to the *sadhana*. Mantras, the sacred sound, both beckoned the deity through recitation and purified the speaker of negative karma^{ix}.

The exact purpose and actions differ from *sadhana* to *sadhana*; at KTC, weekly practices includes *sadhanas* for Chenrezig, Amitabha, Green Tara (replaced by White Tara once a month), and Medicine Buddha. Smaller texts that are practiced within the larger segments include *Verses of the Eight Noble Auspicious Ones*, the *Mahamudra Lineage Prayer*, the *Seven Verse Prayer to Guru Rinpoche*, *The*

Good Tree of Immortal Freedom from Anguish (a prayer for the Karma Kagyu Lineage), Long Life Prayers for Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche and other Gurus, a *Praise to the Buddha Activity* of the Karmapa, and etc. Through practices such as this, my education on the Karma Kagyu lineage was supplemented, while through the deity visualization *sadhanas* I began to explore the nature of the Tibetan pantheon as symbols of desired qualities. In these practices, one visualizes and interacts with a symbol-rich image of the deity, indirectly focusing on those beneficial qualities that the deity represents, until the time when he identifies with the deity and its qualities. Throughout the Chenrezig *sadhana*, for example, one visualizes the form of Chenrezig, his symbol (seed syllable), mantra, and qualities, while chanting until the end, at which point the deity becomes absorbed into the practitioner. Although the chanting is done in Tibetan, for what Lama Kathy and other Lamas have described as the benefit/merit of using the traditional language, one must know the meanings of the lines in order to adequately perform the visualization.

By the time I attended my first *Karma Pakshi Tsok*, a monthly *sadhana* practice, I was beginning to be recognized beyond the label of newcomer. An older gentleman named Mark, whom Kristen had described as “Crazy Wisdom” for both his vast knowledge and his slight eccentricities, requested that I sit by his side. Throughout the ceremony, he whispered to me the meanings of actions and symbols, and prepared me for what I need to do next. *Karma Pakshi Tsok* is intended to reinforce the community after a month of the normal social tensions; taking place in the evening, it requires that all attendees bring an item of food to be offered alongside the *torma* (tiered unbaked offering cake). During the chanting, the food is ritually offered to the shrine and then served to the community members; leftovers are given to the animals. The mood is usually light and cheerful, the focus on the community and its repair brings people to chat and reconnect over food.

Losar (Tibetan New Year) and the First Light Ceremony (early morning of January 1st) are annual events focusing on community. For *Losar*, the Dharma Talk is replaced by feast and festivities, the shrine room now a place to mingle and taste Tibetan dishes offered by a local Tibetan-American family. The First Light Ceremony acts not only as a means for reestablishing the local community, but reminds local communities of their global connections to the larger Buddhist *Sangha* as each Center lights one hundred and eight^x candles are ritually lit with the rising sun.

Becoming Buddhist

I would later learn that the practices with which I had been dabbling were considered somewhat esoteric as one must get permission, as well as attend reading transmissions and empowerments, in order to officially practice them. I had been acting Buddhist but had not truly become Buddhist, for I lacked a Guru and his permission to practice. Unlike many who come to KTC, I did not participate in the Refuge Ceremony shortly after moving out of the introductory classes and into the main shrine room. On one hand, these ceremonies are fairly rare in day to day routine and I was not exposed to many opportunities. On the other, I still had yet to determine whether my interest in the tradition was spiritual or intellectual. As I reached a point when it may have been appropriate for me to take the Vow, I was designing this research project and my status was growing more ambiguous.

The survey and interview participants frequently discussed the Refuge Ceremony as a matter to be decided by feeling. Casey commented, “I didn’t seek it, and I didn’t see or feel it happen. It had organically occurred, and that was when I knew it was time to take my refuge vows.” At the same time, participants often postponed or reconsidered Refuge in terms of intention, which, according to Vajrayana Buddhism, is the driving force of Karma and spiritual transformation. Natalie described checking her intention: “I think I rushed in to it [the Refuge Ceremony]. Everyone who I took classes with

was getting ready for the ceremony, so I just got caught up in it.” She took a few months off, away from KTC, to consider her decision. “I think I was just making sure that I wasn’t doing it because I hate my parents or want something exotic or something like that.” Over time, I watched a number of members whom I had considered to be “long-timers” take the Refuge Ceremony, contributing to the collective surprise when such a person is revealed to be unnamed^{xi}.

Approximately two years after completing introductory classes, I spontaneously took Refuge. As one of the survey participants said, “I never planned to be a Buddhist. It just kind of happened over time.” The Venerable Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche was in Columbus for a weekend teaching session; this was my first time meeting a Tibetan spiritual leader and experiencing the exhausting and exhilarating schedule of activities during a weekend event. At one point, someone announced the posting of a sign-up sheet for the Ceremony in the back of the room. Carried away, perhaps by more collective cheer and goodwill than I had ever experienced in one place, I put my name to paper and was one of about twenty people to bow before the Rinpoche that night.

As the first ceremony for a new Buddhist, it is a rather simple and pleasant experience. Refugees were given seats close to (but below) the Rinpoche, who described to the room the importance of the commitment and instructions for starting a Buddhist lifestyle, including practices, creation of a shrine, and daily repetition of the Four-Line Refuge Prayer. We then repeated the vow three times in Tibetan, taking refuge in the Three Jewels (the Buddha, Dharma, and *Sangha*) and thus promising ourselves to the Buddhist path. Individually, we approached the Rinpoche, presenting the crowns of our heads for a ritual cutting of a small strand of hair, taken after the completion of the ritual formula: Are you happy (to have your hair cut)? I am happy (*Dro-la*). It is excellent (*Lek-so*).

Hands before my chest in the traditional loosely-cupped position, I told the Rinpoche I was happy; in exchange for my hair, the symbol of my attachment, he gave me my Tibetan name: *Karma Sonam Palmo*, Glorious Merit of the Karma Kagyu Lineage. What’s in a name? Primarily, connection to

the lineage through adoption of the *Karma* appellation. However, perhaps playfully, the names gain more meaning to the *Sangha*. A recent Ceremony revealed a young man with the same refuge name as the Karmapa, for which he was granted teasing comments such as “large shoes to fill,” and sober comments on the auspiciousness of the name. When my own name was called, I received a pat on the back from one of the senior students who shared a similar name. In reaction to his own name, Glorious Morality, the Senior jokingly says he thought “How rectally clenched is that?... I’m gonna be a flower!” Joking aside, the *Sangha* has been taught that refuge names refer to the qualities of the person one becomes as he approaches Enlightenment, although it is not clear from these reactions to what degree this belief is maintained.

In the end, we fully prostrated three times, although whether toward the Rinpoche or the shrine behind him, I am still not sure. *Lek so*.

Growth vs. Spiritual Materialism

“This is the first thing we have to train is our intention. So this is called the aspiration of the Bodhisattva. We aspire and that’s how we begin. Transformation is by aspiring to be more.” -Lama Kathy Wesley in her popular weekend teaching, *On Anger*

It would be difficult to over emphasize the importance of intention in the Vajrayana tradition; for a belief system in which spiritual transformation is achieved through mental and experiential transformation, it is impossible to move forward without “pure intention.” Teachers warn the *Sangha* about the dangers of spiritual materialism, the transformation of the spiritual into an intangible, collectable currency. This may occur in the form of collecting empowerments or reading transmissions into a mental “résumé” of sorts, collection of spiritual objects or use of spiritual objects as mundane objects (e.g. wearing a mala as jewelry or purely an identity statement), and collection of teachers or teachings (especially in the form of “name dropping”). These habits become increasingly problematic

once they are made public, especially through the act of bragging. One of the interview participants told me “I’ve collected the Chenrezig and Amitabha, White Tara and Green Tara, and I think Medicine Buddha empowerments over the years.” Realizing his mistake, he quickly added “It’s not like a goal I’m chasing, it’s just that when teachers are here and they’re giving them, I’m going to go ahead and take advantage of that.” Others avoided discussing the subject of empowerments all together, even when asked directly, dismissing them as unimportant.

The collection of spiritual objects and potential for misusing them as mundane objects is especially problematic, more so, I would suggest, because of American tendencies to collect material objects. First, almost all special events are concluded with the presentation of a small gift to participants, such as protection cords, deity images, necklaces, etc. Secondly, every special event is accompanied by the appearance of a small, makeshift store in the basement. The great diversity of symbolism, whether in the materials and shape of *malas* or in the form and types of deities, the blessing of the object or quality of it, etc, may lead one to purchase of more materials than can be used and maintained. It is not uncommon to see or hear of KTC members with a number of *malas* for different moods or practices, or an excessive shrine, like that of Doug, which is “definition of spiritual materialism...I have more stuff than I can put out!” The act of throwing away Dharma items, especially items depicting deity images or teachings, is highly ritualized; most often, once someone has obtained a Dharma item, it is easier to store it then to find a way to get rid of it.

Jokes on the subject are very common, perhaps the result of the tension caused by awareness of the negative effects (ego, pride, negative karma) of spiritual materialism. Doug’s light comment above is one of the most common jokes at KTC; members can commonly be seen gesturing the hand-slap or self-effacing when purchasing Dharma goods or talking about empowerments, etc. Doug describes his shrine as “obscenely beautiful,” both acknowledging the fault and the pleasure he receives from it. One of the most elaborate spiritual materialism jokes came from a pair of the Center’s somewhat vulgar but beloved

thirty-something men. They described to me a type of Buddhist they call “Dharma dorks,” those that go a bit too far, asking to be called by their Tibetan name, wearing robes (without achieving the Lama or monk titles), collecting Dharma items as if in a live-action role playing game: “I got +3 Chenrezig and a +4 mala!” If these “Dharma dorks” actually exist to such an extent, I have yet to meet them. However, the line of joking touches on what is ultimately an important issue: you cannot impress a Buddhist with spiritual materialism; “you’re not a reincarnation, you’re Bob from the suburbs.”

Giving Back: *Karma Yoga*

The fall of 2009 was a particularly busy season for KTC, with two weekend teachings (from Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche and Bardu Tulku Rinpoche), the hosting of the Heart Shrine Relic Tour, the annual Fall Retreat in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and the intensive two-day Nyungne Retreat. At this point, I seized every opportunity for participant observation as well as for personal experience. I had been attending a variety of events on the weekly, monthly, and yearly schedules, and had formed relationships with many of the members, whether as friends, acquaintances, or curious student and spontaneous tutor. The more I approached the *umpseys*, Shrine Care team, and senior students with questions and concerns, the more they responded to me. As I sought to learn more about the philosophy and praxis of KTC, I learned more about these teachers and friends; however, nothing changed my relationship with the Center and the *Sangha* more than offering my services. Eager for a full experience of the busy autumn schedule, I requested a position as a *Karma Yogi*, a volunteer who cares for the Center and the *Sangha* during these events. The result was a number of weekends during which I spent up to thirty hours at the Center, cleaning, preparing, doing whatever was needed; the result was the smiling, friendly faces of KTC members who associated me with this special event.

The acts of washing dishes and sweeping floors were balanced by fascinating new experiences, such as learning the ritual of making and presenting tea to Bardor Tulku Rinpoche, who, despite his elevated status as a reincarnated *Tulku*, interrupted my well rehearsed ritual to chat in heavily accented English about my tattoo. Through the *Karma Yoga* position, I served as a guide in the Heart Shrine Relic Tour, explaining to visitors the ritual actions involved in visiting the relics, and receiving blessings by a Lama holding a case of Buddha Relics, claimed relics from the earthly remains of the historical Buddha. I also spent a weekend in retreat with fellow KTC members, during which we habituated a cabin in the woods and were given the opportunity to experience a semi-monastic routine. The actions of a *Karma Yogi* are considered practice should one maintain a pure, selfless intention. For me, however, the benefits of *Karma Yoga* were far too great to allow pure selflessness.

Beyond KTC

The most common informal activities performed by KTC *Sangha* members are personal gatherings, such as Dharma fires^{xii} at the horse farm of one member. These types of events are frequently reserved to smaller social circles within the larger *Sangha* and may not be publically announced. Other events outside of KTC, such as the annual gathering at the local YWCA Family Center to distribute food on Thanksgiving, provide opportunities for members of the *Sangha* to connect to those with whom they may not normally have social time. Trips to Taj Palace Restaurant are tradition during Lama visit weekends; despite the common complaints about the quality of the food and distant location of the restaurant, *Sangha* members continue to attend this social event. The moments of downtime shared by event volunteers also allow for informal activity, such as the squirt-gun fight using blessed saffron water which immediately followed the Relic Tour clean up, or escapist hikes into the woods or town during the weekend retreat.

The act of pilgrimage gains its significance from the Buddhist tradition, although it takes various forms in America. The most common act of pilgrimage for KTC practitioners involves driving to other Midwest and East Coast cities for a special event or teaching. KTC members frequently visit KTD or other national KTCs for such events, often traveling in small groups. Another popular pilgrimage is to the *stupas* of the American Southwest, although these are most commonly side-trips as part of a larger vacation. Every so often, a member may visit India, Tibet, or Nepal in order to see a Guru, attend an event, or sightsee the famous sites of the Buddha's life history; again, these trips are more often spiritual vacation or business rather than traditional pilgrimage.

Chapter 5: The *Sangha*: a Refuge and Jewel of the Buddhist Path

"I believe that it's no mistake that the Buddha said that the *Sangha* is one of the Three Jewels. And we need to be a jewel for each other, with each other." —Doug, his eyes welling under his fashionable glasses, a crooked smile on his face.

The Refuge Vow, the statement made when becoming a Buddhist, symbolizes the taking of refuge in the three tools most valuable to the Buddhist path: the Buddha as the teacher, the Dharma as the path, and the *Sangha* as the community which support each other along the Buddhist path. By taking refuge, one is acknowledging the inherent value in both the local and global communities of Buddhists. *Sangha* includes not only these local and global dimension, not only the relationship between Guru and student, but also relationships between "spiritual friends," "companions along the way...and particularly great companions that have been down the path way and the Center of their heart, the Center of their life, is helping all of us." For many of the survey and interview participants, the *Sangha* was one of the greatest draws in the conversion process. For others, it became a cause to leave.

Meet the *Sangha*

The KTC *Sangha* is large and diffuse, with many levels of relationships and participation. Hundreds, if not over a thousand, visitors may walk through the door of Columbus KTC in a year; the community, thus, is flexible, amorphous, and in constant flux. Those who have been to the Center in six months or more may return to the status of “regular” through renewed vigor and attendance, while lack of attendance rapidly removes someone from the social organization. The complex and busy lives of members means a mutual understanding of periods of lacking attendance and practice. While numbers of attendees follow temporal and event patterns, it is rare for the *Sangha* to have the same composition at any two given events.

In order to create an image of the *Sangha*, I surveyed the crowd during three main sessions of a Sunday in late spring, 2010. During the Medicine Buddha *Sadhana*, five practitioners participated, three women and two men. Of all of the practices, the chanting *sadhanas* are the most flexible to great variance in attendance, depending on the time, weather, events, etc, of the day. *Shinay* meditation that day consisted of thirty-four participants, twenty-four female and ten male. Only three participants were under the age of thirty, ten were in their thirties, four in their forties, and eleven over fifty; all were Caucasian except for one Asian-American and one African-American. During the Dharma Talk, sixteen males and twenty females participated. Six were under the age of thirty, eleven in their thirties, six in their forties, and twelve over the age of fifty. Twenty-two were Caucasian, one was Asian American, and three African American. The Beginner’s Class included five males and five females, three in their twenties, three in their thirties, and four in their forties. I argue that these numbers are fairly representative of an average day at KTC.

The Value of *Sangha*

Responses to the surveys and interviews provided extensive material on the importance and benefit of *Sangha* for participants. Many appreciated the *Sangha* as a locus for finding like-minded friends, “exactly the kind of people and general vibe I love,” a place where one can build “relationships that are real and lasting and not just based on magnetism.” Participants described the KTC as a place where like-minded companions meant the greater opportunity for tolerant discussion and informed philosophical debate. Parvati describes one of the draws of the community as the ability to have significant conversations and “work through some heavy things sometimes.” Intolerance, disinterest, or simple misunderstandings often prevent *Sangha* members from engaging family and friends in Buddhism-related conversation. As a member of the *Sangha*, freedom to explore these topics may increase. As one survey participant put it, “it’s easier to be a Buddhist when there are others who understand it and why you chose it.”

Time spent at KTC is designed to be an ultimately pleasurable experience. *Shinay* provides many with a renewed sense of calm and Dharma Talks are written to entertain as well as inform. Attendance is voluntary, and may serve as a break from one’s every day, mundane life. The atmosphere is colorful and cheerful in the shrine room, inviting and comfortable in the lounge. Naturally, a great proportion of visitors on an average Sunday at KTC will be happy, calm, and pleasantly social. The difference in attitude between a place like KTC on a Sunday and a given location in mundane life is striking; compared to the average American crowd, KTC members seem to glow with contentment and create an atmosphere of enjoyment. This is a phenomenon that was commented on in quite a few surveys and interviews. One woman’s thought: “you see that in people around who are practitioners here. You feel good when you’re around them,” or another’s description:

A big part of why I attend KTC is also that there is harmony in the *Sangha*, which creates a space in which people can deepen their connection with the Dharma and makes the process enjoyable.

Others describe this phenomenon in terms of “vibes” or collective energy. In her teachings, Lama Kathy emphasizes the power of collective energy: “when a group of people get together, they can produce a lot and when they put their energy together, that energy is magnified by their joint aspiration and activity,” thanks the *Sangha* members for their attendance and combined energy. This idea extends to the concept that beneficial energy of practice and good emotional states lingers in physical objects, such as spiritual tools, shrine water/food, and physical places.

One of the senior students taught an introductory class that “there is tremendous energy released in meditation practice...it is subtle.” It is difficult to determine the extent to which such a belief permeates the general public; in my experience, many KTC members often shy away from discussing topics which seem too “flakey” in order to avoid the prejudice and stereotype associated with American Buddhists. However, it is a fairly common topic on the online forum, where eight percent of the sampled topics were prayer requests, with messages such as the following: “there are many great things about a *Sangha*, but one of those is that we take care of each other by sending out positive energy and thoughts.” On the other hand, one of the most senior students informed an introductory class:

I want to make clear that we’re not actually sending or receiving anything... this is not an exchange of energy of any kind...we’re using the imagination to train the mind in loving kindness and compassion. We use the mind to work on the mind.

The characteristics of tolerance and inclusivism resulting from key elements of Vajrayana philosophy create an environment in which those who may feel rejected in normal society may come to know acceptance. At the same time those who isolate themselves from others through judgment are

asked to develop nonbiased acceptance through an understanding of those qualities which are universally the same (Buddha Nature and suffering). Participants on both sides of this relationship described the satisfaction which it produced; Jean, the ever-smiling matron:

I think the most draw for me was how loving and kind people were to me, that I could be whoever I am and be totally accepted. I could be rich, I could be poor, I could be fat, I could be thin, I could be black, I could be white, and no matter what, they accepted me there...it was so safe for me. It was a place where I could just be me. And to have people that practice like that around me is just what I wanted. It's what I wanted to be.

Robin, on the other hand, worked with Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche to bring down social barriers caused by pride and judgment:

One day I went to the Center and looked at everyone, and I really just fell in love with everyone. Rinpoche told me my passion is how to become compassionate...he said you have to love everyone, just love them for who they are. And one day I was at the Center and they weren't the crazy weird people anymore.

While these two cases represent different aspects of the inclusivism at KTC, the act of developing acceptance and being accepted through *Sangha* and praxis might explain the social connections within the community.

Eight of the twenty-five survey participants expressed loneliness, separation from loved ones, or family problems in the self-description section; at the same time, descriptions of *Sangha* as family or a similar support system were common not only in the data, but also in everyday conversations. Statements such as "Everyone at KTC is regarded as family," or references to the support system in place ("I wanted to thank all my Dharma friends for the outpouring of love, support and prayers") suggest that

for some members there is a confidence in the system of support. Although I have not witnessed any examples of collective financial support, evidence of emotional support is quite common, especially in times of illness and death. The web forum alone is indicative of this support system, as are the acts of dedicating practices and lighting candles for those ailing or in need. After losing her job to an unexpected downsizing, thirty-five year-old Katie reached out to the other members, receiving advice, dedications, even some small personal loans and parting gifts as she relocated. While the material alleviation of her situation was minimal, Katie expressed relief in receiving this emotional support.

Social Organization

KTC is run by volunteers, including an elected volunteer Board of Directors containing a director, assistant director, Lama Kathy, and a treasurer. For the most part, organizational and financial decisions are made by the Board and, to a lesser degree, the dues-paying members of the *Sangha* and long term *karma yogis*. Former members of the Board maintain a social standing on the same plane or just below the Board themselves as (usually) paying members, trusted advisors, and friends, while other senior students linger in a similar, if slightly lower, standing. It appears that activity in service of KTC, past and present, is a major decider of social standing and defines the outer limits of the tightly-knit internal circle. One disgruntled member described the social situation at KTC: “there seems to be this core group of people that think they’re super special...The larger portion of people do flow in and out.” While the inner core remains fairly constant and seemingly has an established hierarchy, those beyond this circle grow increasingly less bound and show significantly vaguer hierarchical patterns. If any hierarchy exists in this outer circle, it would seem to be the result of either relationships with the inner circle or consistency of attendance. In this case, however, I would be more inclined to describe this as a system of friendships created by common experience and acquaintanceship.

Outward from the inner circle, any hierarchy becomes progressively less concrete and more transitory. Those which come more frequently and perform more services for the Center are on friendlier terms with the Board, Senior Students, and *Sangha* in general. One is also able to gain social status through the accumulation of knowledge in an externally recognizable form; attendance in study forums (teachings, book clubs), for example, frequently change the social dynamic toward greater inclusion of those participants. Proximity and relationship with Lamas and Gurus is usually correlated with social standing as well; during Rinpoche visits, for example, only Board members and other upper status figures are invited to visit the Rinpoche outside of the Center or host him. Social status also becomes apparent in the seating arrangements in the shrine room during teachings; long before most visitors have arrived at the Center, spaces closest to the Rinpoche are reserved for those of high rank, such that Lama Kathy is seated directly in front of him.

The Teachers

Beyond the hierarchy present in the inner circle of KTC, the extended *Sangha* functions under the spiritual attainment hierarchy of the Tibetans. Titles such as monk, Lama, and Rinpoche reflect the education and perceived spiritual progression of the individuals, who are arranged in a hierarchy of student-teacher relationships. Even within KTC, the student-teacher relationship creates the most concrete social hierarchy. Neophytes often describe their introductory class teachers as role models, such as in Doug's description: "It's a really amazing group of people (the introductory class teachers)...they're very wise and know a lot, and that's another reasons I keep going back, is because I aspire to be more like them." Similarly, no amount of political power achieved by a Board member would allow him to transcend the status of Lama Kathy, who is often deferred to by merit of her philosophical and spiritual attainment as a successful three-year retreatant. Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, as

her teacher, holds greater sway, while the Karmapa makes the ultimate decisions. Here, the importance of the student-Guru stressed by Tantrayana serves not only in authenticity and secrecy, but also in the maintenance of the social hierarchy.

Beyond the Pink Cloud Version

“You go through a pink cloud version of Buddhism...where everything seems to be so beautiful and perfect and then, things start to change.”

KTC is not a utopia of social bliss, and the data from surveys and interviews revealed a strong undertone of discontent with the social situation of the *Sangha*. To Katie, “Sometimes I don’t see a lot of Buddhism with a lot of the Buddhists there, myself included.” The most common complaints were the non-Buddhist behaviors such as grabbing for power, closed-mind judgmentalism, and actions which cause harm to a person or his relationship with the Dharma. For some, “there’s a concern that they’re [certain *Sangha* members] just doing this for a social set,” others worry about the influence on newcomers on an environment that is “intimidating due to groups of ‘insiders.’” One man, lines of frustration on his face, described the social situation as:

...a meat market... this is a classic story; I could easily list fifteen cases... people come down there suffering... and immediately meditation and practice help them.... they hear all this good stuff, and they meet people. They have a good energy from practicing and feeling better, and naturally attract people. And they often stop taking the medicine they need because they feel good; and they come back tail between legs a year later.

He continues to describe this “meat market” dating scheme as ultimately harmful and occasionally dangerous in cases which involve predatory individuals. My experiences at KTC confirm his comments,

although I would emphasize the subtlety of this phenomenon and that it is limited to a small portion of individuals.

For the most part, participants admitted the fleeting and somewhat petty nature of their arguments, describing them as karma, aggravation, *kleshas* (afflictive tendencies), and the natural balance of a large social group (e.g. “I think anytime you have organized religion and you get a bunch of people together, there’s going to be the church ladies and there’s going to be the goofballs and there’s going to be the wild people,” Kristin). Center Director Erin shared:

When I first encountered arguments between *Sangha* members, I was so surprised. We’re Buddhists, where’s your compassion, man? Lama Kathy told me that Westerners are not usually born Buddhists, so we are searching for something when we find the Dharma. Many people come to Buddhism broken... So, I tried to keep in mind that we all come here with our faults and we can’t always check them at the door.

The First Noble Truth, *dukkha*, emphasizes the universality of suffering^{xiii}; this concept that we all approach Buddhism from a place of pain (or dissatisfaction) may allow the practitioner to more easily forgive transgressions which would normally cause social tension. The ability to forgive *Sangha* members for wrong behaviors could serve as a powerful social cohesion mechanism.

Reproducing the *Sangha*

There’s always been a little bit of reluctance in terms of how to reach out. It’s because we’re proscribed from proselytizing. So where does the line fall from saying we’re here... and proselytizing? –Former Center Director Ed

One of the greatest problems faced by KTC today is the issue of the aging population and the debate over deciding which methods are sufficient social reproductive acts. Of all of the visitors to

KTC^{xiv}, those under the age of twenty-five are the rarest. I would estimate seeing approximately four people of this age range regularly attending^{xv} during the 2009-2010 academic year, myself included. The strict no-proselytizing rule prevents an active campaign for membership, resulting in a young population that is either unaware of the existence of the Center or unsure of potential reasons for practicing. When flyers were proposed as a method of increasing awareness of the Center, they were initially rejected because they described the introductory classes as “free,” implying value beyond what the reader would normally bestow. The rule of no-proselytizing is invaluable in promoting tolerance and ensuring that the practitioner will have the pure intention required for self-transformation. The result, however, is a snowball effect; there are few young people in the *Sangha*, so few want to join.

Children are almost non-existent at the Center; with the exception of celebrations and other special events, it is not uncommon to see even one child visiting the Center per month, and these are almost always those children at a pre-latchkey age. An attempt at a “Sunday School” type program earlier this decade was lost to lack of resources. Parents are encouraged to practice the “bee-to-flower” method in teachings such as this visit by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, a Canadian translator for KTD:

never, ever, ever push Buddhism, Buddhist ideas, Buddhist practice, Buddhist observances on children. Ever. Make it available to them but accept their appetite. Honor their appetite and curiosity rather than your own hopes. So, if one of your children asks a question...Answer it. Just don't answer the questions they didn't ask. And, this really isn't age specific. This is the same way to deal with adults too.

This appears to be the approach that most KTC parents take, although it is not uncommon to see newcomer parents and children taking introductory classes together. Faith in the Dharma's ability to attract new Buddhists through mystical or unseen forces may be aggravating the situation; teachings at KTC frequently emphasize that one's relationship with the Dharma results from the aggregation of

unseen karmic forces. As one father put it, “I have enough confidence in teachings that they [his sons] are connected to the Dharma in a way. They can’t help it.”

That is not to say that the bee-to-flower method of *Sangha* reproduction is inherently flawed or ineffectual. I have seen many examples of this method attracting others to Buddhism. Images or other Buddhist items act as conversation starters, as do discussion of weekend plans, changes in attitude, etc. Doug describes the process of being asked questions as fun and natural in his workplace. With friends, he suggests that similar points of view to his own would naturally make them more receptive to learning about Buddhism. Others, like Jean, were asked by friends and family to explain changes in mood and attitude, especially the lessening of anger. This method allows those who may be receptive or interested in the tradition to become exposed to it; however, it relies on the concept of the “ripening of one’s karma” to determine the time and nature of his encounter with the Dharma.

Chapter 6: The Place

Getting to Know KTC

The physical location of KTC, from the colorful shrine room to the interior of the kitchen cupboards, is an incredibly intricate, multifaceted setting upon which multiple layers of symbolism, history, philosophy, and praxis can be found. Coming to know the locations and significance of the majority of the practical elements took years of attendance and practice, and I am not entirely convinced that anyone, except perhaps Lama Kathy, truly knows all the intricacies of the location. The journey of developing my understanding of the physical surroundings was in many ways paralleled by my journey to understand the people and tradition of the place. Lessons most often occurred when I approached an idle member with a question about surrounding objects, or when I offered to learn the duties of shrine maintenance. Annie, a kind and patient mother in her forties, would describe elements of the shrine, as well as their care, functions, and meanings. Over time, the images of the Lineage Masters lining the walls began to tell comprehensible stories, as did the images of Bodhisattvas in their livery and the once seemingly random objects lining both shrine and shelf.

Description

The colors and all the stuff on the shrine and everything, the whole thing, fit right into my heart. It was so vast...I forget that term...where something is bigger inside than it is outside... that's what KTC was. You walk in and it's like miles high and long. I was like 'wow!' because I felt the presence of something... limitless... it was vast as space. —Keith, smiling at me over a scone, who had kept our interview appointment despite the recovering rescued raccoon in a cage in his nearby car.

Through the exterior crimson doors, up the stairs, and through the bannered doors (see Image 3), one enters the heart of KTC, the shrine room. The sloped ceilings, colorful decorations, light of the

mid-morning sun through the windows, and lack of tall, obstructing objects creates an impression of a vast and vivid space (see image 4). Upon entering, the shrine becomes the immediate focus of attention in a line of sight framed by the bright *dhvaja* (victory banners) hanging from the ceiling. From the walls, a “nice, buttery yellow,” hang *thangkas* (cloth paintings) and framed paintings depicting the cosmos and Karma Kagyu Lineage Holders, and the pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

In front of the shrines, an area of the floor is elevated and carpeted in the Tibetan crimson, and a raised meditation cushion and knee-high painted desk at the front of the platform provide a seating area for the teacher. This seat, a symbolic elevation of the teachings rather than the teacher, is usually reserved for Lamas rather than the senior *Sangha* members who generally teach three out of four weeks. Next to the main shrine (see image 5), is the seat of HH the 17th Karmapa, a much more elevated seat upon which there is a portrait of HH adorned with a *kotta* (blessing scarf) and in front of which a large table and double *dorje* banner create a space upon which one is able to make offerings to the Guru. These offerings are often pieces of food, water, or flowers.

Behind the teacher’s seat is the main shrine, a crimson and yellow stepped display upon which deity statues, offerings (esp. water), *tormas* (offering cakes of metal or oat), and candles can be found. These statues, frequently brass, depict deities such as Chenrezig, Tara, and Shakyamuni Buddha, as well as lineage masters, and are most frequently seated upon a base expertly and precisely filled with tiny scrolls depicting mantras and various symbolically meaningful materials (e.g. incense dust, saffron). From the shrine, a hierarchy of importance becomes clear; Chenrezig, patron saint of Tibet and compassion incarnate, is central, followed by Shakyamuni and Tara. To the far left and right, smaller shrines hold statues of the Historical Buddha and the wrathful Mahakala Buddha (see images 6 and 7), the slayer of destructive thoughts and actions. A stand on the right holds a few dozen candles, each dedicated to a person(s) by means of a small index card.

Behind the shrine are two doors leading to a small library, in which introductory classes are taught. This library houses the *sadhana* texts, long, rectangular pieces of paper wrapped in decorative cloth, from which the longer chanting practices are read. In all, however, this library is a less colorful, more intimate environment in which new students can slowly grow accustomed to the vibrant and somewhat exotic setting of the Center. Downstairs (see image 8), a basement-turned-family-room style lounge and kitchen provide casual spaces for socialization.

Significance of the Physical Space

Space is powerful in a number of ways. First, the images throughout the Center hold storytelling power to those acquainted with their stories as well as worldview reinforcement. Second, the majority of the items contributing to the atmosphere of the place were approved of by Lama Kathy, under the advisory of Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and hold weight as both exotic and authentic. The shrine room is bright, vivid, and open, creating an atmosphere conducive to cheerful spiritual development. Nine of the twenty-five survey participants discussed the beauty and atmosphere of the Center as a cause of initial attraction to the Center. Eleven of the twenty-five were from Catholic backgrounds and may have found comfort and familiarity in KTC, a locus of what was once described to me as “the Catholicism of Dharma.”

As I came to know the people, praxis, and physical location of KTC, I became aware of a dualistic nature shared by these three facets. On one side, practitioners are reverent, deeply spiritual, and philosophically probing, while on the other, they are laid-back and fun-loving. This dualism was very clearly manifest during the Heart Shrine Relic Tour; devoted practitioners during the day, I watched tears come to the eyes of some as they bowed to the claimed physical remains of the Gurus and others meditate with great focus in the same room. As soon as the relics were stored and the cleaning finished,

however, some of the same practitioners were having squirt-gun blessed-water fights or posing for pictures in the shrine room as thousand-armed Chenrezig. One may question if the irreverence of the former negates the reverence of the later, but I would argue that it does not. The deities and Gurus of the Vajrayana do not demand devotion, reverence, or piety, but rather assist in spiritual transformation^{xvi} for which practitioners are not asked to give up their pleasures. For this casual, laid-back, fun-loving stereotype, Karma Kagyu is jokingly called the “Hippie Lineage” by other American Buddhists. The physical location, similarly, reflects these two facets of the practitioners, from the beautiful, exotic shrine room to the casual, relaxed lounge.

The Draw of the Location

Survey and interview participants held a wide range of opinions on the atmosphere of the Center, though positive or neutral comments were more common than negative ones. For many, like Jean, the Center is a sacred place:

I don't know if it was the air, I don't know if it was the place being so sacred, I don't know if it was the people, I don't know if it was a combination of everybody and everything, but it's like, when I get there, I'm home. It's like- it's my sacred place... it's just a loving atmosphere. And even though it has its issues, just like any other human thing, for me it's bigger than that. It just really is.

For others, like this young woman who posted this on the online forum, it is a place of beauty and joy:

Today at KTC was so vivid and bright -- a roomful of Shiny Happy People -- how beautiful they all were, reflecting love and happiness like the facets of a gem. All sparkling and offering the best of themselves to all the others. So inspiring. What a wonderful day and I am so glad to have been there.

Those from artistic backgrounds, such as Arthur, who designed, built, and painted his own ornate home shrine, the elaborate nature of the Center can be appealing not only visually, but because “it makes it really easy to engage my creative mind.”

On the other hand are those to whom the ornate decorations are of little value. The vivid room may be just too adorned for some, too bright, too exotic. Those that do not immediately leave, however, may come to find value in the seemingly excessive decoration, as John did:

[At first], it all was weird! Everything!... it could be the Catholicism of Dharma! Colors, pictures, it was not what I was looking for, or thought I was looking for. But I stuck around and...the thing that made me interested and what has kept me around is that even the most esoteric Vajrayana... practices, teachings, if you keep asking questions, you'll uncover the logic... I would not be here if I couldn't find it.

The elaborations which at first may seem superfluous, overly exotic, and unappealing to some often have relevant practical applications on the Vajrayana path. Images of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are used in visualization practices through which one seeks to develop beneficial qualities such as compassion, loving-kindness, and patience; care of an intricate shrine requires patience and dedication, and can become a meditative act. Complex rituals of supplications, prostration, and offering may be used to instill humility and negate one's concept of self.

For the most part, whether for the aesthetics, inspirational quality, or practical application, study participants often expressed the value and/or draw of such an environment.

Chapter 7: Becoming the Researcher

Balancing Two Personalities

By the time my research was designed, the project approved by the IRB, and KTC members approached as possible interview and survey participants, I had already been engaged in regular participant observation at KTC for more than a year. I had explored an array of calendrical rituals and practices, accumulated knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist teachings and philosophy, and had participated as a *karma yogi* through a busy autumn season of special events. When it came time to find study participants, I had formed either friendships or acquaintanceships with a large portion of the regular population; as a result, although study participation was offered and open to all adults members of KTC, the vast majority of those whom responded were people whom I considered friends. This was especially true in the case of interviews, which lasted anywhere from one hour to four, and ended with a hug (one of the most popular activities at KTC). On one hand, these people were my teachers and friends, about whom I cared; on the other, I sought an objective viewpoint from which to approach the study. Recognizing that a fully objective position was no longer possible, I instead aimed for maximizing objectivity as well as maintaining awareness and providing disclosure of possible subjective leanings.

The Texts and Recordings

As I approached the question of why Americans are adopting and practicing Tibetan Buddhism, I explored the possibility of textual analysis of the chanting *Sadhana* texts. These texts are treated with respect and great care. They are wrapped in clean, colorful cloth, which does not touch the floor; they are placed in elevated positions, so that one does not accidentally step over them; the pages are turned with the right-hand only; etc. Needless to say, requesting the use of one of the texts for the purposes of photocopying was a difficult and halting task. One afternoon, a couple of members overheard the

conversation as I asked a Board member for permission, and a couple of weeks later Annie surprised me with a bundle of texts she had purchased for me.

The act of giving is greatly stressed by the teachers as KTC as a tool for loosening attachments to the ego and our false understanding of the world around us. The practice was described by Lama Kathy as such: “one way to [cease self-clinging] is to... using an intellectual construct... say to yourself, no giver, no receiver, no object, and no action. This is called concordant practice.” I cannot say whether the gifting was, for Annie, a practice of selflessness or simply kindness. In a similarly spontaneous act of gifting, John returned from a teaching by the Dalai Lama with a bag stitched with an image of Green Tara after I had sold him my ticket. Natalie spontaneously presented Katie with a Chenrezig statue for her shrine. Those with whom I have discussed this phenomenon have informed me that it is a pleasurable and freeing act.

KTC maintains an archive of recorded teachings of Lamas and Rinpoches dating back to the nineties. In order to consider the common themes, I offered my services in digitalizing and transcribing a portion of the archive in exchange for the freedom to listen to the teachings. I believe that the success of this arrangement depended heavily upon the desire of the Board to make the teachings accessible and able to be disseminated to those who requested them in either audio or textual form. However, approximately one-half to two-thirds of each year’s teachings were not saved, for the archivists decided not to include the teachings of senior students.

Ambiguity and the Private/Intimate

The live teachings were significantly more difficult to preserve as usable data. For a ten dollar fee, the KTC audio crew will copy recent teaching from the hard drive onto CD; the result was limited access to quotes from the majority of recent teachings, as well rapid and often illegible note-taking. Natalie approached me one day, proclaiming, “I always wonder if you’re taking notes for research or for

yourself.” Other KTC members similarly seemed to struggle with my ambiguous identity as both researcher and friend, to continue our conversations as if they were a chat or an interview. I attempted to navigate the two personalities by keeping them as separate as possible but as time continued I was faced with an increasingly common need to maintain my researcher personality and with the difficult situations of hearing a relevant fact in an informal conversation or the revelation of an intimate fact during a formal interview. In the end, my primary goal was the protection of the privacy of my informants.

Although I considered the majority of my informants to be friends, I did not expect the scale of honesty which I received, especially in the interviews. In these, I was told tales of sexual assault, heroine addiction, spurned advances from a “horny Lama,” growing up with an alcoholic, dealing with psychological trauma and recovery, anger management issues, botched abortion, failed marriages, and broken hearts. Through these stories, I came to understand what one of the informants told me: “my path to Buddhism is much like other people’s. It wasn’t that one day I was enjoying a delicious glass of buttermilk and it dawned on me to become a Buddhist...it was through tremendous suffering and pain. Pain was the touchstone of my change.”

The Interviews and Survey

Of the nine interviews, six took place in coffee shops, two in the interviewee’s homes, and one in a place of work. Interviewees were given the survey before hand, several of whom took the time to fill it out. Interviews were recorded but were somewhat casual. Using the survey questions as a guide, I asked participants to explore their religious histories and spiritual presents. Most proceeded like the unfolding of a life story, with only minimal directional input from me.

The survey (see Appendix D) contains twenty-eight questions of optional length. Questions span from autobiographical questions to questions about religious history, the discovery and adoption of

Tibetan Buddhism, and the current form of religious practice. Participants were reminded of their right to skip any question and thus not every question was answered by all twenty-five participants.

The Forum

Columbus KTC maintains an online forum through Yahoo! Groups that I also considered in my analysis of themes (see Appendix E). Of one hundred consecutive “Topics” (grouped messages), twenty-eight were announcements or discussions of events. Eleven were volunteer or charity requests/opportunities, nine were study resources, eight were prayer requests, and eight were news. Forty-two percent were planning for a future event, twenty-five were informational, and twenty-one were requests (for help, prayers, etc). Thus the primary activities of this online forum were the planning, disseminating knowledge, and requesting help.

Chapter 8: Themes

In order to explore the described reasons for conversion to Tibetan Buddhism, I first arranged the results thematically. Thus far I have described two of the most prominent themes: the *Sangha* and the Atmosphere. Although complaints and complications were apparent, they appear to serve as powerful elements in the introductory process and influence the act of adoption of Tibetan Buddhism. Here, I will briefly explore other major themes in the participant's discussion of the process of conversion.

Other Religions

Seven out of twenty-five survey participants were raised in nonreligious households, while eleven came from Catholic backgrounds. For those from religious households, the majority described an experience of disconnection from the church, deity, or system of belief. This separation was a simple divide for some, such as Jean, who loved Catholicism as a child, but as she matured “felt that they didn’t get it. I can’t explain it... something was missing,” or Arthur, for whom the Methodist Church “just never fit. I never felt right. It didn’t make sense.” Others, such as Greg, parted from their childhood traditions on the grounds of irreconcilable personal philosophical and theological beliefs: “I never, ever, ever liked the one true god thing. That was the one thing that more than anything bugged me about Christianity was...as a Christian I felt like I had to be exclusionary.” Jean similarly struggled with the concept of divine forgiveness, saying “I think that people should be accountable somehow. And with Buddhism, it’s your karma.”

This divorce from one religion was a turbulent time for others, such as Natalie, who fought to reconcile her beliefs with her growing awareness of the world:

I don't think I quite figured out how to deal with the disparity between the bonds or potential of human emotion and...the place that the world actually is... we all want to be loved, we all want to be happy, we all want to not be hurt, and we hurt each other. We then do horrible things...It just blew my mind, here I was studying. I still can't accept that a conscious loving...omnipotent creator whose emotion for us we can only compare to a parent to a child...If you were a parent, you would unmake this kind of pain.

Kristin, too, faced the irreconcilability of divine will and extreme pain:

"I was really mad at God. I was really pissed off because my twenty-five year-old cousin died of cancer, and everybody was like 'it's God's will' ...and I was thinking 'that's messed up. What god would do that to somebody if he has all control, why would you put somebody through that if they're your child and you love them? ... That was kind of the start."

Others faced violent divorce through disillusionment with the religious establishment itself, such as Allen's disgust in the Catholic Church: "My eyes opened to enormous hypocrisy, prejudice (against all other faiths, blacks, etc), even cruelty."

Not all KTC members, however, experienced a great divide from the religions of their past. A significant portion of members^{xvii} retain elements of their earlier belief system, describing Buddhism as either a continuation or a complement to the earlier religion. On numerous occasions, I have heard KTC members describe themselves as both Christian (or Jewish, etc) and Buddhist. Lama Kathy, Catholic school-girl turned Vajrayana Lama, says of Catholicism: "I never thought of myself as having left anything. I think of what I'm doing now as a sort of a continuation of what started in that period of time." Doug, who has explored a number of religious traditions throughout his life, describes his spiritual journey as a similarly unbroken path: "I would say I learned the sense of devotion from the Catholics, that I've carried in. And I learned how to think from Jews, how to ask good questions." Others describe

Buddhism as a means of better understanding the truths of other traditions, such as James' reinterpretation of his childhood lessons: "the messages of Jesus as what I now understand to be the Bodhisattva path. I was inspired and supported by this faith, in childhood."

Participants also expressed the various religious traditions of their pasts as sources of greater Truths, as we can see in Keith's description:

If you ever read the Sermon on the Mount... they're brilliant. There's no difference than the teachings of the Buddha. I cannot find single difference. Because once I started studying Buddhism years later, suddenly, the great gift of Buddhism was to open up what my heart sense of what Jesus was as a child and a young man... one of the reasons I consider myself a Buddhist is because it made everything so clear to me, as far as what I actually, fundamentally believed in. It put it in more sophisticated terms... and let me have a grounding for my feelings.

Quite frequently, the path to Buddhism was described by participants not as linear but as circular, with the past and present informing each other in numerous valuable ways. For many, Buddhism became part of a greater spiritual quest for understanding and transcendence, another opportunity to seek answers.

The Student-Guru Relationship

The majority of survey participants began their Buddhist careers as students of Dharma books. These books, especially those of the Tantrayana tradition, tend to make great promises, seemingly leading up to a climax in which the author will finally reveal the knowledge necessary to begin the path, only to end with a reference to the importance of finding a Guru from whom the reader can learn the esoteric teachings. In many of these texts, the student-Guru relationship is described as a penultimate

spiritual bond, an appealing, personal, mystical relationship through which the student can begin to grow. In the end, the reader is plagued with unanswered questions while endowed with a mental image of sitting at the foot of a great Guru and learning the answers to the secrets of the universe. The romanticization of the Guru here is not my own, but rather a common theme sprouting from the Vajrayana student-Guru relationship, and a very common theme among study participants.

John, for example, spoke of the Gurus at KTD:

“when I really think about it I almost, you know, just cry from the kindness that they all grant. They know better than we do what we need. And they give it as much as we’re willing to receive...without expectations. That’s really touching. That’s where we’re aiming, right?”

He later continues:

“when I’m with our teachers, I feel that they have nothing but my wellbeing in mind. And man...you don’t get that in your life, except from your parents, and they don’t have, necessarily, the wisdom that these teachers do. Who wouldn’t want that? So that’s why. That’s why. That’s how you can place yourself in their care. When they tell you to do something, I don’t have to think ‘oh, well, this is because they want to accomplish this or that’. They only want to accomplish you happiness. It’s not transactional... relationships, almost exclusively in your life are transactional... I don’t get that with our teachers, at all.”

Jason, another introductory class teacher, welled up at the thought: “I can hardly look at that man [Bardor Tulku Rinpoche] without bursting into tears...I can just feel pure love from him. That’s what I want to be when I grow up.”

Doug similarly described the moment of bonding with his own Guru, Kenpo Karthar Rinpoche, whom he thinks of as a manifestation of the deity Amitahba:

“I was with Rinpoche and he deeply pointed out the nature of my mind. I was a puddle of tears, totally undone for days. And I asked him if he would be my teacher, and he just smiled, like ‘what took you so long?’”

Asking a Guru to accept you as a student is an important step in the Vajrayana path, and one not to be taken lightly. It is the duty of the Guru to “know more about you than you do” so that he may trick your mind onto its quickest path to enlightenment. The nature of the Vajrayana path necessitates a Guru, for without one practices beyond the preliminary remain hidden. One of these practices is Guru Yoga, through which one comes closer to the Guru through visualization and then closer to a deity through imagining the Guru and deity are one.

The Guru-student relationship, romanticized as it may appear, has proven appealing to many members of the KTC *Sangha*, both attracting and anchoring students to Tibetan Buddhism.

Changing One’s Orientation to the World

For practitioners of Judeo-Christian background, Tibetan Buddhism offers a vastly different concept of the self and the phenomenal world. It asks the student to mentally deconstruct the world around him. For forty year-old Jim, “their teachings have influenced how I think about myself and the world around me.” According to Lama Kathy Wesley, “Buddhism is a technique to recondition us,” through which one becomes released from previous conditioning patterns. On the world around us, “we just think that all of this stuff is real and solid and when we wake up we realize it’s not.”

From the introductory classes, students at KTC are exposed to the doctrine of *anatman* (no-self) and the concept of impermanence. Through a series of questions in which the student is asked to locate the true permanent self^{xviii}, the teacher demonstrates that the self is composed of nothing more than five impermanent and ever-changing aggregates (e.g. mental activities, senses, the body). Similarly, the

teacher reveals to the student that the phenomenal universe contains no truly permanent, unchanging forms; objects in the world, ever changing, contain no inherent qualities and thus clinging to them is a foolish deed. This dramatic reorientation to the world may be appealing in a number of ways; it allows one to first reconsider priorities and reevaluate the importance of the things which cause us to suffer. It also allows us to become a blank slate in self-definition; if we ultimately have no inherent qualities besides mutability and impermanence, then we may begin to be free from the burden of negative self-definition.

“We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts, and with our thoughts we make the world.” There is immense potential within this quote from the historical Buddha, one which, according to Lama Kathy, “... puts us in the driver’s seat. It means that we make the world with what thoughts we nurture.” Through this line of thought the practitioner is promised ultimate power over his world through the control of his thoughts. One of the senior students tempts the introductory class with this thought: “we all have a mandala [cosmological microcosm]...what kind of world will you make?”

Self-Help

“Very few people come through the doors feeling great. You know, there’s some pain, some problem that they’re searching for answers to. And I don’t say that to sound all spiritual and be gooey, but if everything is going great, people don’t come to KTC. And that was definitely the case for me.”

John’s view of the path to Buddhism as one lined with pain and difficulty is one shared by many of the KTC study participants and teachers. The theme that “many people come to Buddhism broken,” “when we come to Dharma...we feel something’s not quite right,” or that “pain is how a lot of folks come to Buddhism,” is extraordinarily common here. Senior student Mike admitted during one Dharma Talk that

“if we’re honest, initially we’re taking refuge just to feel better,” and that he comes to KTC in order “to smile and actually mean it.”

Luckily, “there are lots of relatively minor sufferings that we can escape through practice” according to Lama Kathy, and others testify to “experiencing increased well being almost immediately.” As a form of therapy, the practices do not “guarantee that your illness will be cured, but you will feel, something will happen. You will feel something,” according to Lama Yeshe, who uses praxis as a means of controlling his anxiety disorder.

The growing popularity of meditation as a therapeutic tool may perhaps be a common thread among survey participants. In one introductory class, three of the six visitors admitted that they had approached KTC as a supplement to therapy. Others were directed to the Center by cognitive behavioral therapists and other counselors. From my own experiences with beginning calm-abiding meditation, I can confirm that positive benefits, such as a sense of calm, decreased stress, and increased well-being, begin to manifest only a short time into the first meditation session^{xix}. Immediate improvement can be a powerful tool in the conversion process as both a reason to initially investigate the Center as well as a source of confidence in the perceived or expected transformative abilities of the practice. However, as one develops along the Buddhist path, however, he begins to see that “this isn’t about therapy, like, how do I solve my problems? This is about destroying suffering utterly.”

Personalized Program

One of the values of the doctrine of Expedient Means is the ability for a Buddhist practitioner to utilize only those practices which are effectual for him, or “take what you want, leave the rest behind.” KTC is home to a wide variety of practitioners of various skill levels and with diverse tolerances or cravings for the new and exotic. The Center’s leadership promotes a “bee-to-flower” method of both adopting Buddhism and of continuing along the Dharma path, and “at whatever level you feel like you

want to plug in at, it's available. It's taught here and it's available. " When the student feels like something is missing, the Guru offers him a practice which may suit his needs and abilities. If there is a specific problem in his life, the student is free to seek out the appropriate remedies. Speed and ability are not issues, there is no remedial class; students from all different paths may benefit from practicing under the same roof. This personalization has the power to both allure new converts and maintain current practitioners. It is especially fitting for students whom consider themselves unique individuals, such as the majority of the study population as well as the greater KTC population.

Self-Transformation and Agency

Many participants found that Tibetan Buddhism, lacking such a creator or ruler deity as we see in the Abrahamic traditions, was liberating in that it allowed the practitioner control over his own fate. Said Arthur on the appeal of Buddhist philosophy: "In Buddhism...there's nobody in charge. There's no overarching figure who says 'Okay this is what the purpose of your life is.' And so... each individual person determines that purpose." Not only does the individual now have freedom over his own purpose and the direction of his fate, he is given the tools with which he can direct it. Through the practices of the Karma Kagyu tradition, the KTC teachers say, one is able to begin to master the mind, controlling the thoughts it entertains and thus experiential reality. What's more, we can control the way we interact with the world and with other people, becoming effectively able to change who we are and our relationships with others. Although KTC teachers acknowledge that the self is ultimately a construct which one will move beyond as he spiritually ascends, they also frequently emphasize practice as a means of changing who you are (personality, behaviors, etc). The new Buddhist is presented with a community of what seem to be calm and happy people offering assistance in transforming the self and

controlling the direction of his life; all participants in the study listed the transformative properties of Buddhism as an important element of their adoption of the tradition.

The recorded teachings clearly emphasize these points. In one of the introductory classes, self-transformation was described as such:

We all have illusions about who we think we are... we label ourselves all the time in a very complex set of labels. What Vajrayana does in a systematic way is gives you the possibility of working directly with that and basically relabeling yourself.

This creates an idea that self-transformation is possible and that the transformation is somewhat simple and self-contained. The concept that we control our experiential world, the only world that is real to us, with our mental actions appealingly proposes human agency as vital. What's more, the transformation is an opportunity not only to move beyond painful elements but to transform them into something useful.

According to Lama Kathy:

We have a very workable situation...our difficulties, instead of pushing them away, we use them on the path....because our afflictive emotions have no solidarity or permanence, we can transform them into their opposites.

As Buddhists, Lama Kathy tells us, "we have the opportunity to do something different," a chance to avoid the pain and suffering, the failed attempts at happiness, which are evident in most of the rest of the world.

The new American Tibetan Buddhist is granted not only the vision of change, but the practices with which to initiate it, which "will take you as deep as you want to go." The practitioner is given the lessons and practices, but the practice is totally self-driven, the change self-made. As one survey participant described the practices: "Buddhism provides a 'bag of tools' to help me respond skillfully to difficult situations." One of the most common emphases of KTC teacher is the act of "taking any circumstance, no matter what it is, and bringing it on to the path of Dharma, turning it into a practice

situation.” The result, many express, is a newfound vigor for spiritual practice, as was the case for Jean: “What did I do in my Christian life? I went to church on Sunday once in a while and I’d say a prayer or two. Now I do prayers all the time... I just do a lot more practice than I did.”

The hierarchy of paths to liberation (see Chapter 2) allows new students to acknowledge the selfish nature of his current spiritual actions and it’s disconnect with the greater spiritual transformation without shame or concern over the future of his spiritual transformation. As one survey participant openly admitted:

I have no desire to be enlightened. My desire is to be a better person with no reservations or bitterness, to have a completely open heart. For me, Buddhist practices allow me to slowly see change happen in that direction, naturally.

KTC practitioners happily shared their stories of the transformation. Robin professed, “I felt such a deep, rich change in my life,” and Jean joyfully proclaimed, “my family notices a significant difference in me. It’s actually unbelievable. My kids love that I’m Buddhist, because they remember the old me.” For Arthur “the benefits are huge... I’m not nearly as anxious as I used to be, I’m not as critical, I’m not nearly as argumentative.” The result for Ashley: “this practice has changed my life. It has made me a better person. I cannot imagine my life without the Dharma.” To the visitor to KTC, as I once was, these claims may seem incredible but seem to be supported by the calm and cheerful personas of the practitioners and by the experience of most first meditation sessions. In the end, says Arthur “if I’m wrong it’s still helped me to live a better life by being more conscious of what I’m doing, so it’s a win, no matter what.”

Chapter 9: Applying Theory

Liminality, Communitas, and Anti-structure

Turner's stages of the ritual process help us understand Tibetan Buddhism and its attraction in the U.S., especially if we first consider the Refuge Ceremony, the ritual through which one moves from an interested outsider to being a member of the *Sangha*. The "refugees" are generally those who have exhausted the eight-week introductory classes and are beginning to integrate themselves into weekly schedule in the main shrine room. During this time, the refugees exist in a stage of liminality; they are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between," existing in a state between outsider and insider that is ill-defined (Turner, 95). The introductory classes are an important piece creating the liminality for these individuals; while in KTC, they are separate from the social system outside and not yet integrated into the social system within. While they may have different life stories, personalities, and names, to the members of KTC there is generally "nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes" (Turner, 95). Those in the introductory classes are normally quiet observers, "their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey instructors implicitly" (Turner, 95). Often the introductory class teachers become mentors and role-models for their students in these classes, who often idealize them. As a "blank slate upon which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group" (Turner, 103), these neophytes are often the most engaged learners to be found at KTC. The introductory classes include the transmission of those most important pieces of knowledge that are central to a Buddhist practice.

In spite of minimal relationships with the group at large, the connection between those with whom one has shared the introductory process is strong and often lasts long after the ceremony. Long-time members will sometimes refer to someone as "x, who took refuge with me." Turner tells us "communitas is made evident... only through its juxtaposition to... aspects of social structure" (Turner, 127). As one who has undergone this process, I can testify to the effects of this juxtaposition; it results in

a bonding with those who are in a similar neither insider nor outsider state, no matter who they are or what age, personality, socio-economic standing they have in the real world. As Turner says, “secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized” (Turner, 95). The lack of integration into the KTC population while one is in this stage makes it a relief to have access to others who are similarly outsiders looking in. Members have often described their introductory experience to KTC in a similar way, emphasizing the feeling of being set apart from the members (often described as a “clique”). As Turner says, “communitas emerges where social structure is not” (Turner, 126). However, hundreds go through the KTC enculturation process (introductory classes primarily) each year, and only about 10-20% successfully integrate into the Center. I believe this is, in part, due to the high degree of commitment which one must show to the introductory process before becoming an integrated part of the social structure.

During the Ceremony, initiates are symbolically and physically set apart (moved to an area nearest to the teacher) and homogenized (given white blessing *kottas* to wear). They perform prostrations and say vows in unison. At the end of the Ceremony, initiates move beyond anti-structure and are offered a place within the social structure at KTC. Each approaches the teacher individually, presenting a piece of hair to be cut in a symbolic gesture of renunciation (including symbolically renouncing attachment to the past and your past idea of self). Refugees are given a Tibetan name by the teacher. Each student at this Center, like all students in the Karma Kagyu lineage, have a name that starts with the same first word: Karma. Discussion of refuge name is often one of the first bonding experiences between an initiate and the rest of the group, and the similarity of my own name to one senior student’s allowed for this experience.

Beyond the ritual process of initial integration, we see that KTC fits Turner’s stages as a whole unit as well. Turner tells us that “communitas breaks through the interstices of structure in liminality; at

the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority” (Turner, 128). At KTC, we find that the great majority of members belong, in the greater context of society, to marginalized groups. Most practice alternative lifestyles and many have expressed “not quite fitting in” with family, society, or at work. Another large population at KTC includes those in need of self-help, who often are dealing with relationship problems, drug addiction, depression (and other mental health issues), life crises, and health problems: life events which may cause disconnect between a person and the social world around him. Members also tend to be largely creative, artists, who “tend to be liminal and marginal people” (Turner, 128). These artists often describe Buddhism as beneficial, even inspiring, to their artistic endeavors.

Many of the members are displeased with the larger structures of their lives and society (often social justice seekers and sometimes utopians) and seek a liminal environment, which is appealing for its anti-structure, its sense of immediacy (“communitas is of the now;” Turner, 113), and a feeling of equality. The Center was initially created, largely, by a group of hippies, and is still widely attended by aging hippies and their later-generation equivalents. According to Turner, “the values of communitas are strikingly present in the literature and behavior” of hippies (Turner, 112). Despite the attempts of hippies to forever remain in the liminal phase, Turner tells us that “social life is a dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation” (Turner, 97). KTC provides this dialectical process between liminality and mundane life. Members can move into a liminal environment by attending KTC functions (formal or informal), but also must return at the end of the day, weekend, retreat, etc to their normal lives of work, family, responsibilities, etc. Each attendance provides the members with the opportunity to return to the real world changed; generally with renewed enthusiasm, calm, and a refreshed philosophical perspective. I have heard some describe this as a “shot of happy juice” for the week, especially those concerned with

jeopardizing the larger spiritual transformation they seek by becoming satisfied with minimal weekly changes in their moods.

Liminal space is created in a number of ways and its presence is reasserted throughout the day. Firstly, by taking off one's shoes and ascending into the shrine room and prostrating to the shrine, the liminal space is defined. Since the practices take the better part of the day, it is necessary to give practitioners several breaks. During these times, many of the members socialize and discuss their lives in the downstairs lounge. When a new practice is about to begin, however, ascending to the shrine room and hearing the sound of the gong reminds members that they are in liminal space. Anti-structure is formed through the emphasis of equality of all sentient beings and the enforcement of rules which require members to do nothing; in their normal lives, the idea of equality has no reality and idleness is generally frowned upon.

Technologies of the Self

Technologies of the self, as defined by Foucault, "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 18). Although the traditional goal of Buddhism involves a different definition of the self and gradual release from one's concept of the self, most members of KTC are firmly grounded in the Western worldview and its notion of self. When discussing the Buddhist idea of no-self, or egolessness, most admit to a view that they are simply "not there yet," and accept the Western concept of the self (for practical reasons as well). Thus Foucault's concepts of the technologies of the self can be applied here without much alteration to the term "self."

One might consider many of the activities at KTC to be part of Technologies of the Self. Each practice is done with the goal of self-transformation. The terminology might be somewhat different however; one might hear “accumulation of merit,” “developing loving kindness and compassion,” “removing negative obscurations,” etc, but these are all means toward the ultimate goal of gradually moving closer to Enlightenment. The Technologies of the Self at work here become much more apparent when we move beyond the philosophical ideal of transformation and consider the immediate changes desired. Many members of KTC will admit that the goal of Buddhism for them is not Enlightenment, but to feel good (or better). Others come to become better people by honing specific qualities and features (and hiding/eliminating others), or by becoming “more spiritual.”

KTC activities (which remain in a form fairly close to that performed at KTD) are easily adapted no matter which of these transformations a person desires. *Shinay*, or tranquility meditation, both calms and relaxes while (done correctly) improves temperament (slows emotion reaction times) and focus. For those with mental health issues or life crises, *shinay* is usually the basic practice prescribed. Prostrations are done to create humility, self-as-deity visualization may improve confidence (in actions- other practices, such as dedication of merit, are done to avoid getting a fat head), and *tong-len* (visualizing that you are removing the suffering of others and giving them happiness while utilizing ritual posture and breath) is done to increase compassion.

In his discussion of the genealogy of the Western concept of the self, Foucault tells us that “knowing oneself becomes the object of the quest of concern for the self” (Foucault, 26). I have not encountered a teaching at KTC which fails to touch on the subject of self knowledge, whether by description of the self/human nature or by promoting introspection and self-analysis. The process of *shinay* is often called “watching the mind,” for one’s task is to notice the arising of each thought and gently release it from the sphere of attention. Teachers at KTC emphasize the value of this practice in

allowing one to better understand the way that he thinks and functions. By slowly developing a working knowledge of oneself and his mind, he is then able to better control himself (especially the emotional aspect of the mind). Foucault tells us that in Western history “the scrutiny of consciousness consists of trying to immobilize consciousness, to eliminate movements of the spirit that divert one from God” (Foucault, 46). In a similar way, KTC members employ the practice of *shinay* in order to halt those negative actions and thoughts, to prevent the negative accumulation of karma that removes one further from the ultimate spiritual transformation. On the level of Buddhist philosophy, it is only by becoming awakened to the true nature of oneself that one is able to undergo the ultimate spiritual transformation.

“The concern with oneself is not just obligatory for young people concerned with their education; it is a way of living for everybody throughout their lives” (Foucault, 31). Although Foucault is discussing the genealogy of the Western concept of self, this is applicable to KTC members. A large number of members are nearing or past retirement age and several are elderly. Young members are often amazed by the choice of the elderly to convert to Tibetan Buddhism in their golden years considering the trends (or, stereotypes) of the elderly clinging to traditional values; however, the older members view it as an opportunity to become better, happier people. Also, there is the case of people who have been practicing consistently since the early 1970s; Buddhism is expected to become an integrated part of the rest of one’s life, regardless of spiritual progress or life changes. Even if one does not expect to reach enlightenment by the end of their life (and most do not), they continue to practice either as part of a lifestyle or in preparation for the next life (reincarnation is accepted by some at KTC).

Chapter 10: Reflections

Findings

A number of common themes indicate potential causes for conversion to Buddhism in the case of KTC study participants. Transitions from other traditions took four major forms: gradual falling away, usually from divergent philosophical ideas; violent rejection, usually from irreconcilability of painful realities and religious ideas; continuation with Buddhism as a step in the path of ultimate spiritual understanding/transcendence; or supplementation with Buddhist ideas being used in conjunction with the practitioner's other tradition. Tibetan Buddhism was described as a philosophy which would appropriately either supplement or replace the previous religious tradition.

The social aspect of Columbus KTC was one of the most widely discussed causes of adoption after the initial visit. Participants described being exposed to role-models which they hoped to emulate through practice, or like-minded people with which they enjoyed sharing the activities. KTC's emphasis on tolerance and acceptance was a commonly described benefit, as was the ability to discuss the philosophical topics without fear of judgment or stereotype. Many described the *Sangha* as family and discussed the support system and friendships as important elements of their experience at KTC.

Relationships with the teachers were also of great importance. Descriptions of the student-Guru relationship found in books on Tibetan Buddhism, as well as teaching at KTC, outline an appealing, spiritually-intimate relationship; one is able to experience the patronage and wisdom of the Guru and develop a reassuring trust. For those seeking spiritual answers, this format of personal direction from a "highly-realized being" can be very appealing.

The physical location of KTC was also a common theme among participants discussing their initial movement into Buddhism. The beauty and atmosphere are frequently described as inspirational and beneficial to creating a deeply spiritual experience in practice. The physical place also offers

reassurance of authenticity of teaching through the Tibetan objects, while at the same time may have a reassuringly familiar quality to the large proportion of KTC members from Catholic backgrounds.

Participants frequently described KTC as “home,” a feeling that occurred instantaneously for some and developed over time for others.

The commonality of descriptions of pain as a cause of adoption of Tibetan Buddhism suggests that one of the major patterns in conversion is psychological. Many of the participants discussed an ailment, often emotional or physical pain caused by disease, addiction, tragedy, etc, when describing the time of their first visits to KTC. The use of meditation in conjunction with therapy in techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy, as well as the growing awareness in the general public about the physical and psychological benefits of meditation, may be an important factor in the draw of new practitioners to centers such as KTC, while the perceived benefits of the practices may be an important factor in the adoption and continuance in the tradition for many.

The nature of the Tibetan Buddhism at KTC as a personalized and agency-driven technique of spiritual and personal transformation was expressed as another major draw. Custom-tailoring of practices and philosophies involves both the omission and inclusion of elements of the tradition, so practitioners may easily form a practice and philosophy that is appealing to them as individuals. In this way, the tradition both acknowledges and applauds individuality, a quality present in the self-description of many of the participant. For those struggling with issues of faith from their pasts, a tradition which encourages personal examination and validation can be exceptionally appealing. The concept of self-transformation through practice was one of the most widely-described draws and benefits of conversion to Tibetan Buddhism. The idea that one is able to change himself and the directions of his life through the tools of Buddhism may have been a great draw for those seeking to improve themselves and their lives.

The philosophy and conception of the world in Tibetan Buddhism was also often described as extremely appealing. First, the only permanent quality of humans is the universal Buddha Nature, suggesting that people, although suffering, are inherently good and can become something better. KTC teachings emphasize the importance of experiential reality in our lives and the ability to change it through changing mental processes. In this way, one is able to change their experiential world and decrease suffering. The Buddhism of KTC shies away from absolutes, definitions, and affirmations, never simply telling a student that something *is* a certain way, but instead makes suggestions for the students to explore through their own experiences. Those who are unhappy or unconvinced of other worldviews may explore Tibetan Buddhism in order to get a better idea of “the way things really are.”

Significance and Future Research

As a case study, the results of this research will be most informative when considered in light of similar studies. Trends here may be localized or placed under varying degrees of emphasis when other KTC or Tibetan Buddhism populations. I would suggest that the next step in this research is the comparative analysis of various North American Karma Kagyu traditions, perhaps leading to comparative analysis with other Tibetan Buddhist traditions. By increasing the scope of the project, we may be able to isolate common trends and patterns and consider their implications in the larger social context of North America. Studies of the differences between these centers would also be invaluable, especially on issues such as reproduction of the *Sangha* in light of the no-proselytizing doctrine. In the future, I believe that expanding upon and reconsidering the data collected in this study would be of great value; with more time, I would have liked to consider the data in light of existing literature on American Tibetan Buddhism, as well as through the lenses of various theoretical frameworks.

The significance of this case study will be most apparent in its use in larger contexts, such as larger studies on the trends of religious conversion and adoption in America and trends in the forms of American Tibetan Buddhism. Personally, this study represents the accumulation of knowledge throughout an undergraduate education in the subjects of Anthropology, Folklore, Religious Studies, and Tibetan Buddhism. Through my experiences and research at KTC, I have been able to develop a foundation for future years of study and research.

“I can guarantee that his Holiness the 17th Karmapa is very concerned with this: completing the job of properly making the essence of the teachings available in a digestible container.” -Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, KTD lama and translator for HH Karmapa.

This is one of many references to the interest of the spiritual leaders of the Tibetan diaspora in promoting the spread of Dharma throughout the West and presenting it in a way that it is appealing and approachable to those living in the American social contexts. In future research, I hope to explore the relationship between the activities of the Tibetans and the forms of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, as well as to better understand the seemingly irreconcilable relationship between the no-proselytizing doctrine and the missionary work initiated by diaporic Tibetan religious leaders.

Chapter 11: Afterword

The members of KTC and study participants are diverse, as are their experiences and processes of conversion. Overall, however, we are able to see that KTC offers a place for those seeking to either help or transform themselves, a social group in which to belong, an engagingly different philosophy with which to reconsider the world. Whether they approached the Center with a desire to grow, to heal, or to understand, members were able to find something which appealed to them in a lasting way. My own experience with KTC was one of growth and accumulation of knowledge and I am eternally grateful to my teachers: the Lamas, senior students, KTC members, and study participants, who were always eager to share their knowledge and experiences with me.

Notes

- ⁱ KTC (Tibetan) and KTD (Sanskrit) have the same translation.
- ⁱⁱ Currently, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa, Urgyen Trinley Dorje.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Estimate based on mailing lists.
- ^{iv} According to Vajrayana only.
- ^v Which I had already entered for purposes of personal and academic curiosity.
- ^{vi} Primarily through internet and Yellowpages searches.
- ^{vii} Another Guru of the Karma Kagyu tradition until recent questions of lineage removed him from the KTD family.
- ^{viii} Pray here in the sense of hope, rather than communication with a deity.
- ^{ix} The issue of whether or not there were both good and bad forms of karma was a debate I would come to hear argued many times.
- ^x An auspicious number in Tibetan Buddhism, equal to the number of beads on a mala.
- ^{xi} The Refuge Ceremony involves the naming of the "Refugees."
- ^{xii} Members are asked not to throw away items with sacred image and word, but to burn them instead.
- ^{xiii} Or dissatisfaction, depending on the preferred translation.
- ^{xiv} Except the fairly large population of religious studies and humanities students which make a single visit for the purpose of an assignment.
- ^{xv} Attending at least once per month.
- ^{xvi} Whether viewed as actual higher beings or as symbols.
- ^{xvii} Based on survey responses and observed behavior at KTC, I would estimate 15-35% of the population.
- ^{xviii} Except, perhaps, Buddha nature.
- ^{xix} For myself and some others.

Works Cited

- Foucault, Michel, Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton. *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1988. Print (photocopy).
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1977. Print (photocopy).
- Wesley, Kathy. *Silk Threads, a History of Columbus Karma Thegsum Chöling*. 1987. Print.

Appendix A

-Calendar Events

Weekly schedule

Green Tara, Medicine Buddha, & Chenrezig Sadhanas

Open Meditation/Beginning Meditation Instruction

Dharma Talks (Teachings)/Beginning Buddhism Class

Monthly Schedule

Karma Pakshi Tsok

White Tara Sadhana

Yearly Schedule

First Light Ceremony

Losar (Tibetan New Year Celebration)

-Special Events

Lama Visits

Weekend Retreat with Lama Kathy Wesley

Weekend Teachings with Lama Kathy Wesley

Outreach: Dinner at YWCA Family Center

Heart Shrine Relic Tour

Book Study

Workshops (Topics Inc: Refuge, Sadhanas, etc)

ComFest Booth

-Informal Events

Lama Visit Lunches, (e.g. Taj Palace Restaurant)

Building Care, Event Preparation, Shrine Maintenance

Personal events (e.g. gatherings, meals, via invitation)

Appendix B

The Four-Line Refuge Prayer

SANG GYE CHHÖ DANG TS'HOK KYI CHHOK NAM LA

JANG CHHUP BAR DU DAK NI KYAP SU CHHI

DAK GI JIN SOK GYI PAY SÖ NAM KYI

DRO LA P'HEN CHHIR SANG GYE DRUP PAR SHOK

Until I reach enlightenment, I take refuge in all the Buddhas

And in the Dharma and all the noble *Sangha*.

By the merit of accomplishing the six perfections

May I achieve buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Appendix C

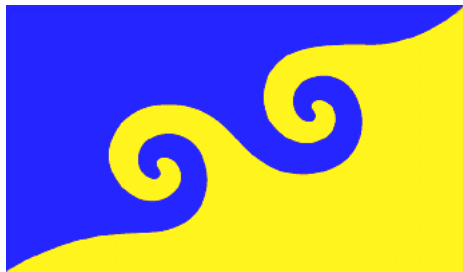


Image 1: The Karmapa's Dream Flag



Image 2: External Façade, KTC (credit: <http://columbusktc.org/ktc05.html>)

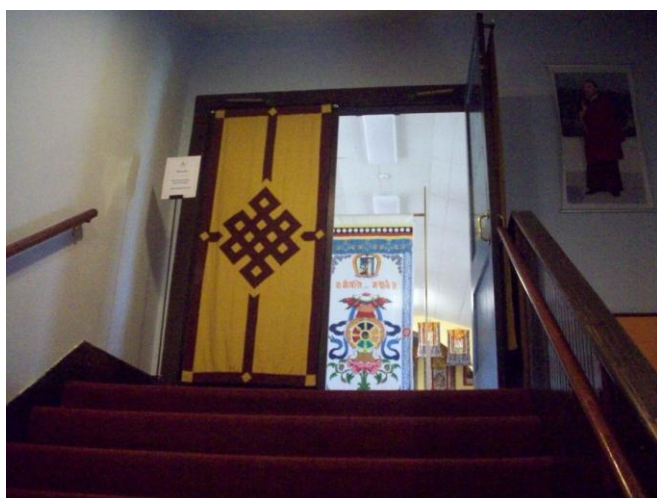


Image 3: Shrine room entrance



Image 4: Shrine room



Image 5: The main shrine



Image 6: Right side shrine (Shakyamuni and Kagyu Lineage)



Image 7: Left side shrine (Mahakala)



Image8: Downstairs lounge

Appendix D

Thank you for participating in this survey. Feel free to use more space than given here (attach additional sheets). You are encouraged, but not obligated, to participate in a short (one-hour or less) follow-up interview. When finished, please return the survey to:

Kelly Schultz

I will be available to pick up surveys at KTC on most Sundays.

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

Age: _____

Sex: _____

1. Describe yourself, your job, family, and life. (What do you do for work? Who are the members of your family or the people you are closest to? What are your interests? Etc.)

2. Describe the religion(s) practiced in your home while you were growing up.

3. Describe your parents' involvement in their religion. Describe your own involvement in this religion. Do you still practice this religion? Why (not)?

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

4. What other religions have you explored or practiced (including other forms of Buddhism).
When and for how long did you practice? Do you currently practice any of these? Why (not)?
What interested you about this/these religion(s)?

5. When did you first consider Buddhism in general? Tibetan Buddhism?

6. What interested you about Buddhism? Tibetan Buddhism specifically?

7. When did you first adopt Buddhism (If you have undergone a refuge ceremony, when was this?)

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

8. Have you practiced Buddhism at any other Centers? What forms of Buddhism? Do you still practice there? Why (not)? What are the most important differences between those Centers and KTC?

9. When did you begin attending KTC? How did you find the Center?

10. What about the Center attracted you initially? What about the Center has led you to stay?

11. How often do you attend KTC? Do you take part in the entire weekly schedule? Which activities do you regularly attend and how often?

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

12. How would you describe your relationship with other members of KTC? How often do you see them at the Center? How often, and in what circumstances, do you see them outside of the Center?

13. Did you know any of the members of KTC before joining? Who and for how long?

14. Are you related to anyone at KTC? Who?

Questions 13 and 14: Names given will be kept in confidentiality. However, you may choose not to give names. If so, please describe the number and types of relationships you have with others who attend CKTC (For example: "My husband, a close friend of 12 years, and a co-worker attend. I have also met 2 close friends at CKTC whom I see regularly outside of the Center, and 5 friends I see occasionally.")

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

15. What influenced you to practice Tibetan Buddhism? Why did you join KTC?

16. What would you consider to be the benefits of your practice (describe them)?

17. What would you consider to be the costs of your practice?

18. How do non-Tibetan Buddhists in your life (family, friends, co-workers) feel about your practice? How much do they know about that aspect of your life?

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

19. How do you feel about influencing others to explore Tibetan Buddhism or begin attending KTC? Have you encouraged anyone to begin exploring Tibetan Buddhism or to begin attending KTC? (If so, do they currently attend/practice?)

20. What does your personal practice of Tibetan Buddhism involve? What practices do you perform on a regular basis? In general, how often do you perform them at the Center? At home?

21. What special ceremonies or rituals have you participated in? When and how often?

22. What lamas or gurus have you studied under? (specify as part of a group, or as an individual)
Describe your teacher, their achievements, and the ways which their teachings influenced you

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

23. What are your personal goals in this practice?

24. Do you still perform any practices other than taught at KTC? Which practices and how often?

25. What materials do you keep at home or at work for the practice of Tibetan Buddhism (e.g. a shrine, meditation cushion, study materials)?

You have the right to skip any question, and your answers are anonymous.

26. Describe to what extent and for what reasons you (do not) believe the following concepts:

Buddha nature of all sentient beings

Reincarnation

Enlightenment of the Buddha

The story of the life of the Buddha

Bodhisattvas

The possibility that you will become enlightened

27. Are there other aspects of Tibetan Buddhism which you do not believe in? (Or perhaps, take as metaphorically rather than literal?)

28. Please add anything else you would consider relevant.

Appendix E

The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research

The Adoption of Tibetan Buddhism by Americans of Judeo-Christian Background

Dr. Jeffrey Cohen

Kelly Schultz

This is a consent form for research participation. It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to further develop our anthropological understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and its role in American life. In this study, we will be inquiring on the topic of conversion to Tibetan Buddhism by Americans raised in a non-Buddhist background, and considering the motivations, benefits, and level of conversion.

Procedures/Tasks:

Interview participants: You will be asked a series of questions about your participation at KTC and conversion to Tibetan Buddhism. Each question is voluntary and you can ask to skip any question, or end the interview at any point. Interviews are expected to last approximately an hour. At the end of the interview, you will be asked if you are willing to be contacted in the near future with follow-up questions. Willingness to be contacted does not imply obligation to answer any further questions.

Interviews will be audio-taped and stored for a 3 year period following the end of the study. Audio files will be accessed by Dr. J. Cohen and Kelly Schultz; audio files will not be made public.

Survey Participants: You will be given a survey containing a series of questions about your participation at KTC and conversion to Tibetan Buddhism. Each question is voluntary and you can ask to skip any question. The survey can be completed through e-mail or on paper.

You are encouraged to participate in both the survey and an oral interview. However, participation in either activity does not obligate you to participate in both.

Duration:

You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

Risks and Benefits:

This study involves no risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. Participation in an interview will present you with the opportunity to grow to a better understanding of your own involvement at KTC and practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups:

- 1 Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- 2 The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices

Incentives:

This study does not include any paid benefits.

Participant Rights:

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

Contacts and Questions:

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact

Kelly Schultz at schultz.315@osu.edu, or (603)706-3265

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms.

Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

I choose to participate in (check one):

- ☐ Oral Interview Only
☐ Written Survey Only
☐ Both Oral Interview and Written Survey

Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

AM/PM

Date and time

Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject
(when applicable)

Signature of person authorized to consent for
subject
(when applicable)

AM/PM

Relationship to the subject

Date and time

Investigator/Research Staff

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Signature of person obtaining consent

AM/PM